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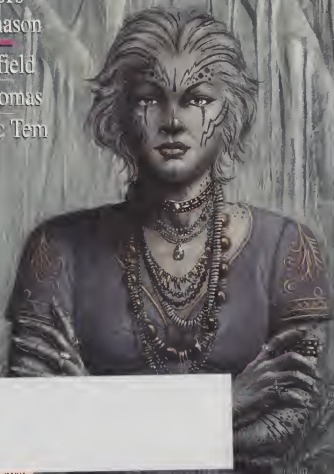
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# EDITORIAL

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## GORDON VAN GELDER

**H**ERE AT THE end of the decade, I've recently heard several knowledgeable people comment on how much the landscape of publishing has shifted in the last few years. I thought I'd use the changing of the calendar as an excuse to take a quick look at some of these perceived shifts.

*Conglomeratization will devour publishing.* Here's a good example of the attitude that seems to be prevailing:

"A good many people who buy books or write them are contending these days that during the past five or ten years book publishing has been transformed by a series of mergers, combinations, and other structural changes from a cottage industry into big business. And some of them go on to lament that the sensitive, cultivated Mr. Henry Holts, Mr. Alfred Harcourts, and Mr. Horace Liverights seem to have been replaced by faceless, soulless,

anomic corporate enterprises."

David Klein expressed this opinion in an article entitled "The Anomic Age of Publishing." It was published in 1963 and I like to keep it on my desk as a reminder that people have been lamenting this process for longer than I've been alive. Somehow, all these mean mega-corporations haven't yet ruined the business.

The truth of matters is that no business is noble, only some of its practitioners are. For every honest businessman of yore, there was at least one crook trying to make a buck out of books. Read up on Mark Twain's publishing adventures if you don't believe me. Or look into the shenanigans of the 1920s publishers — back then, one of their favorite publicity stunts was to try to get a book banned. (I wonder if Mr. Klein would still have considered Horace Liveright "cultivated" after reading Thomas Dardis's 1995 biography of the high-living publisher.)

I got in the business around the time of the big Bantam, Doubleday, and Dell merger and people predicted doom then. Somehow, even after they joined forces, that big mega-corporation managed to publish a lot of first novels, a host of books that will be classics, a lot of short-story collections, and many offbeat, hard-to-classify books. The nerve of them!

I'm sure there are examples of conglomeratization where the publisher didn't fare as well. I'd also point to Tor Books as an example of a company that has flourished since it got bought by a bigger fish, but since I work for that bigger fish, you might want to discount my claim.

What is hard to overlook, however, is the fact that books are singular things. Most corporations are run by people who are smart enough to recognize that fact.

In short, I've seen the landscape here shift, but not change fundamentally.

*Giant bookstore chains will rule the world.* This trend isn't as old as the previous one — I've watched most of it develop over the past decade. And while I thought Barnes & Noble was particularly appalling in the way it drove away small businesses around the coun-

try to seize certain markets, I haven't seen much of a fundamental change in the landscape here.

One reason for my sanguine attitude about the chains is that I've had many occasions to hunt for copies of older books or titles from smaller presses. Here in New York, I found the smaller bookstores were less helpful generally and I frequently ended my quest on the shelves of a large chain store...thus ending my belief in the claim that the megastores would hurt the small presses. There's no substitute for good, enthusiastic management and staff. As it happens, the single most knowledgeable and helpful clerk I've ever encountered was in a chain bookstore outside of Chicago.

One change I have seen is that the sf specialty stores have been dying off this decade...replaced, it seems, with mystery specialty stores. I'm not sure, but I think that the sf stores were more vital in the 1970s, when it was harder to find copies of the genre books. I do know that I haven't had any trouble finding copies of specific sf or fantasy titles in recent years, and the sf shops that are managed best look to me like they're faring well. (I should note here that horror novels seem to grow harder to find all the time — the genre has basically gone

from boom to bust over the past decade.)

Some doomsayers talk with dread about the fact that publishers will consult with the bookstore chains before publishing various titles. This is bad? Was it bad in the 1970s when Judy-Lynn del Rey phoned up the people running various sf stores and asked them which authors were most in demand?

*Publishing has gotten ruder.* Here is one area where I think I have seen changes for the worse. About two years ago, I received an unagented book proposal from a woman with three novels to her credit. I declined the book, and shortly afterwards, got a nice note from her thanking me for taking the time to respond — she said that most publishers never bothered to do so. From what I've seen, this practice doesn't stem from an active desire to be rude so much as it originates in the notion that writers without agents are nobodies. Larger publishers nowadays frequently adopt a policy of not even reading unagented submissions, claiming to be too busy to do so. Personally, I think this trend is the worst one I've seen...but I also know that it assures the smaller publishers a healthy niche. The more dino-

saur leaves their eggs unattended, the more small mammals can swoop in and gobble up the good ones.

*Media tie-ins will destroy our field.* Recently I heard a writer describe his process of writing a tie-in as "a cross between writing a *Planet Stories* story and writing one for *Wonder Stories*." The tie-ins have replaced many of the pulpier elements of the sf field, and while I'd rather see the writer in question working on more original and personal books, we both understand the importance of paying the rent. Tie-ins have grown in popularity during the past decade, but they haven't replaced the most innovative elements of the field and they threaten to do so no more than, say, the Tom Swift books did in the 1950s.

*Kids don't read sf anymore.* When I was growing up, parents worried that kids would no longer read at all. If the mail I receive here is any indication, we're facing no shortage of young readers for sf and fantasy. I don't know that all the YA sf novels published in recent years will make a difference. Isn't part of the joy of discovering sf at the Golden Age of twelve or thirteen the joy in reading books on a par with adults? The prototypical sf

reader has always been a brainy sort, inclined to read above his or her level. What we need (always!) are more stories that fill our heads — kids and grown-ups alike — with that lovely sense of wonder at the universe.

*Kids don't attend sf conventions anymore.* From what I've observed, there's truth to this assertion. I'm convinced the change has come because the Internet fills most of their needs. Way back when, conventions were just about the only place a kid could go where he'd find anyone who read "that weirdo sci-fi stuff" and would discuss it with equal fervor. Nowadays, anyone can find the same sort of discussion online. Plus, the whole "cult" aspect of the genre — in the sense of being something dedicated to preserving that which otherwise would be lost — has been supplanted by the World Wide Web. Time was when you could only find old sf novels at conventions; now you can search on the computer in five minutes and find most anything.

...

This column's running longer than I intended, but let me note a couple more changes I've seen: first novels are easier to sell than they once were; third novels are harder to sell than before; fewer fanzines seem to be published with equal fervor (or is that just my misperception, coupled with a nostalgia for mimeographs?); books are generally longer than they used to be (thank you, o word processor); and most writers are still misunderstood.

And while I'm on the subject of change, let me note that we have a change in our reviewing line-up. Doug Winter's career as a novelist has started to take off, leaving him with less time for a regular review column. While we haven't heard the last from him, his replacement in the regular rotation is James Sallis. Jim was once an editor of *New Worlds* and has written reviews and criticism for the *Washington Post Book World*, *The L. A. Times*, and a host of other publications. I think he's one of the sharpest reviewers around and I think you'll find his columns interesting.



Most people who read Orson Scott Card's stories don't forget them—tales like *Ender's Game*, "Dogwalker," and the Alvin Maker stories tend to leave an indelible impression. Mr. Card's last work of fiction to appear here was "Lost Boys" a decade ago, and some people are still talking about that one. Many of you will also recall that he contributed our "Books to Look for" column for several years before passing it on to Charles de Lint. Most of his recent works are novels, including two new ones this year: *Enchantment* and *Ender's Shadow*. We also expect that his latest fantasy, a picture book for adults entitled *Magic Mirror*, will be released in October.

"Vessel" takes us to North Carolina for an affecting look at family relations. This story was published last year in Spanish and Catalan translations in the magazines BEM and Nexus, respectively. We're delighted to bring you the first English-language publication of it.

# Vessel

By Orson Scott Card

**P**AULIE HARDLY KNEW HIS cousins before that first family reunion in the mountains of North Carolina, and within about three hours he didn't

want to know them any better. Because his mom was the youngest and she had married late, almost all the cousins were a lot older than Paulie and he didn't hit it off very well with the two that were his age, Celie and Deckie.

Celie, the girl cousin, only wanted to talk about her beautiful Arabians and how much fun she would have had if her mother had let her bring them up into the mountains, to which Paulie finally said, "It would have been a real hoot to watch you get knocked out of the saddle by a low branch," whereupon Celie gave him her best rich-girl freeze-out look and walked away. Paulie couldn't resist whinnying as she went.

This happened within about fifteen minutes of Paulie's arrival at the mountain cabin that Aunt Rosie had borrowed from a rich guy in the



Virginia Democratic Party organization who owed her about a thousand big favors, as she liked to brag. "Let's just say that his road construction business depended on some words whispered into the right ears."

When she said that, Paulie was close enough to his parents to hear his father whisper to his mother, "I'll bet the left ears were lying on cheap motel pillows at the time." Mother jabbed him and Father grinned. Paulie didn't like the nastiness in Father's smile. It was the look that Grappaw always called "Mubbie's shit-eatin' smile." Grappaw was Father's father, and the only living soul who dared to call Father by that stupid baby nickname. In his mind, though, Paulie liked to think of Father that way. Mubbie Mubbie Mubbie.

Late in the afternoon Uncle Howie and Aunt Sissie showed up, driving a BMW and laughing about how much it would cost to get rid of the scratches from the underbrush that crowded the dirt road to the cabin. They always laughed when they talked about how much things cost; Mubbie said that was because laughing made people think they didn't care. "But they're always talking about it, you can bet." It was true. They hadn't been five minutes out of the car before they were talking about how expensive their trip to Bermuda had been ha-ha-ha and how much it was costing to put little Deckie into the finest prep school in Atlanta ha-ha-ha and how the boat salesmen insisted on calling thirty-footers "yachts" so they could triple the price but you just have to grit your teeth and pay their thieves' toll ha-ha-ha like the three billy goats gruff ha-ha-ha.

Then they went on about how their two older children were so busy at Harvard and some Wall Street firm that they just couldn't tear themselves away but they brought Deckie their little accident ha-ha-ha and they just bet that he and Paulie would be good friends.

Deckie was suntanned to the edge of skin cancer, so Paulie's first words to him were, "What, are you trying to be black?"

"I play tennis."

"Under a sunlamp?"

"I tan real dark." Deckie looked faintly bored, as though he had to answer these stupid questions all the time but he had been raised to be polite.

"Deckie? What's that short for? Or are you named after the floor on a yacht?" Paulie thought he was joking, like old friends joke with each other, but Deckie seemed to take umbrage.

"Deckie is short for Derek. My friends call me Deck."

"Are you sure they aren't calling you *duck*?" Paulie laughed and then wished he hadn't. Deckie's eyes glazed over and he began looking toward the house. Paulie didn't want him to walk off the way Celie had. Deckie was two years older than Paulie, and it was the important two years. Puberty had put about a foot of height on him and he was lean and athletic and his moves were languid and Paulie wanted more than anything to be just like Deckie instead of being a medium-height medium-strong medium-smart freckled twelve-year-old nothing.

So naturally he tried to cover up his stupid duck joke with an even lamer one. "Have you noticed how everybody in the family has a nickname that ends with *ie*?" Paulie said. "They might as well hyphenate that into the family name. You'd be Deck *Ie-Bride*, and Celie would be *Ceel Ie-Caswell*."

Deckie smiled faintly. "And you'd be Paul *Ie-Asshole*."

Paulie stood there blushing, flustered, until he finally realized that this was not a friendly joke, this was Deckie letting him know that he didn't exist. So Paulie turned and walked away from Deckie. Did Celie feel like this when she walked away from me? If she did then I'm a rotten shit to make somebody else feel like this. Why can't I just keep my mouth shut? Other people keep their mouths shut.

Later he saw Deckie and Celie hanging around together, laughing until tears ran down Celie's face. He knew they were talking about him. Or if they weren't they might as well be. That was the kind of laughter that never included Paulie, not at school, not at home, not here at this stupid family reunion in this stupid forty-room mansion that some stupid rich person called a "cabin." Whenever people laughed in real friendship, close to each other, bound by affection or mutual respect or whatever it was, Paulie felt it like a knife in his heart. Not because he was particularly lonely. He liked being alone and other people made him nervous so it wasn't like he suffered. It hurt him because it was exactly the way people were with Mubbie. Nobody liked him and he still kept joking with them as if they were friends, even Mother, she didn't like him either, any idiot could see that, they were probably staying together for the sake of "the child," which was Paulie of course. Or rather Mother was staying for Paulie's sake, and Mubbie was staying for Mother's money, which was

always useful for tiding him over between sales jobs, which Mubbie always joked his way into losing after having piled up an impressive record of lost sales and mishandled contracts. I'm just like him, Paulie thought. I joke like him, I make enemies like him, people sneer at me behind my back the way they do with him, only I'm not even studly enough to get a rich babe like Mom to bail me through all the screw-ups that lie ahead of me in life.

If I could just learn to keep my mouth shut.

He even tried it for the next couple of hours, being absolutely silent, saying nothing to anybody. But of course the moment he wanted to shut up, that was when all the aunts and uncles and the older cousins had to come up and pretend to care about him. No doubt Mother had noticed that Paulie was by himself and told them to go include Paulie. People did what Mother said, even her older brothers and sisters. She just had a way of making suggestions that people started following before they even had a chance to think about whether they wanted to. So when Paulie tried to get by with nods and smiles, he kept hearing, "Cat got your tongue?" and "You can't be *that* shy" and even "You got something you shouldn't in your mouth, boy?" to which Paulie thought of about five funny answers, one of which wasn't even obscene, but at least he managed not to say them out loud and completely scandalize everybody and make himself the humiliated goat of the whole reunion, with Mother apologizing to everybody and saying, "I can assure you he wasn't raised that way," so that everybody understood that he got his ugly way of talking from Mubbie's side of the family. Of course, Mother would no doubt end up saying that *sometime* before the week was over, but maybe Paulie would get through the first day without having to hear it.

Dinner was bad. The dining room table was huge, but not big enough for everybody. Naturally, they had to have Nana, Mother's grandmother, at the table, even though she was so gaga that she had to be spoonfed some poisonously bland gruel and never seemed to understand anything going on around her. Why didn't they send *her* to the second table with the little children of some of the older cousins, nasty little brats with no manners at all and a way of whining that made Paulie want to insert silverware really far down their throats? But no, that was Paulie's place.

Deckie and Celie were assigned to that table, too, but they ducked off

into the kitchen to eat there, and bad as it was with the brats, Paulie knew it would be worse in the kitchen where he hadn't been invited. So he had to sit there and try to listen over the noise of the brats as Uncle Howie at the other table bragged about Deckie's tennis playing and how he could turn pro if he wanted, but of course he was going to Harvard and he'd simply use his tennis to terrorize his employees when he was running some company. "His employees won't have to try to lose in order to suck up to Deckie," Uncle Howie said. "They'll have to be such damn good tennis players that they can give him a good game. And that means his best executives will all be in top physical shape, which keeps the health costs down."

"Till one of them drops dead of a heart attack on the tennis court and the widow sues Deckie for making him play."

The whole table fell silent except for one person, who was laughing uproariously because after all, he made the joke. Mubbie, naturally. Paulie wanted to die.

After the dead silence, punctuated only by the laughter of one social corpse, Mother turned the conversation back to the achievements of the other children. It was a cruel thing for her to do, since naturally the others asked her about what Paulie was doing, and naturally she answered with offhand good humor, "Oh, you know, he gets along well enough. No psychiatrists' bills yet, and no bail money, so we're content." The others laughed at this, except Paulie. He wondered if maybe some of the older cousins had been to shrinks or had to be bailed out of jail, so that maybe Mom's little joke had a barb to it just like Father's did, only she knew how to do it subtly, so that even the victims had to laugh. But most likely nobody in this scrupulously correct family had ever been in a position where either a shrink or a bail bondsman was required.

Paulie ate as quickly as possible and excused himself and went to the room that had Deckie's stuff in it too, piled on the other twin bed, but mercifully Deckie himself was off somewhere else being perfect and Paulie had some peace. His mother made him bring some books so when he was off by himself she could tell the others he was reading, and Paulie was smart enough to have packed books he already read at school so that when the adults asked him what he was reading he could tell them what the story was about, as if they cared. But the truth was that Paulie didn't

like to read, it all seemed pretty thin to him, he could think up better stuff just lying around with his eyes closed.

They must have thought he was asleep, must have peered in the door and decided he was dead to the world, or they probably wouldn't have held their little confab out in the hall, Mother and her brothers and sister. The subject was Nana. "She's already got all her money in a trust that we administer," Mother was saying, "and she can afford a round-the-clock nurse, so what's the problem?"

But the others had all kinds of other arguments, which in Paulie's mind all boiled down to one: Nana was an embarrassment and as long as she remained in the Bride mansion in Richmond their family could never return to their rightful place among the finest families of Virginia. Paulie wanted to speak up and ask them why they didn't just put her in a bag, weight it down with rocks, and drop it into the James River, but he didn't. He just listened as every one of Nana's grandchildren except Mother made it plain that they had less filial affection than the average housecat. And even Mother, Paulie suspected, was opposing them because whoever ended up in that mansion would be established for all time as the leading branch of the family, and Mother couldn't stomach that, even though by marrying Mubbie she had removed herself from all possibility of occupying that position herself. At home she talked all the time about how her brothers and sisters put on airs as if they were all real Brides but the spunk was gone from the family after Mother and Father died when they went out sailing on the Chesapeake and got caught in the fringes of a spent hurricane. "Nana is the only remnant left of the old vigor," she would say.

"Drooling and grunting like a baboon," Father would always answer, then laugh as Mother ignored him.

"She still understands what's going on around her," Mother would say. "You can see it in her eyes. She can't talk or eat because Parkinson's has her, but it's not Alzheimer's, she's sharp as a tack and I have no doubt that if she could write or speak, she'd wipe my brothers and sisters right out of the will. And since she can't do that, she does the only thing she *can* do. She refrains from dying. I admire her for that."

"I refrain from dying every day," Mubbie would say, every time as if he hoped it would be funny if he just got to the right number of repetitions.

"But you never admire *me* for that." At which Mother always changed the subject.

The conversation in the hall went the rounds until finally Aunt Rosie said, "Oh, never mind. Weedie's never going to bend" — Weedie was Mother, who preferred the nickname to Winifred — "and Nana can't live forever so we'll just go on."

They went away and Paulie wondered how Nana would feel if she could hear the way they talked about her. Didn't it ever occur to any of them that maybe she would be just as happy to be rid of them as they would be to be rid of her? Paulie tried to imagine what it would be like, to be trapped in a body that wouldn't do anything, to have to have somebody wipe your butt whenever you relieved yourself, to have to have somebody feed you every bite you ate, and know that they hated you for not being dead, or at least wished with some impatience that you'd just get *on* with it.

And then, drowning in self-pity, Paulie wondered whether it was really different from his own life. If Nana died, at least it would make a difference to somebody. They'd get a house. Somebody would move. People would have more money. But if I died, who'd notice? Hell, I probably wouldn't even notice. Not till it was time to eat and I couldn't pick up a fork.

It was dark by now but there was a full moon and anyway the parking lot around the so-called cabin was flooded with light, especially the tennis courts where the thwang, thunk, thwang, thunk, thwang of a ball being hit and bouncing off the court and getting hit again rang out in the night's stillness. Paulie got up from his bed where maybe he had fallen asleep for a while and maybe not. He walked through the upstairs hall and quietly down the stairs. Adults were gathered in the living room and the kitchen, talking and sometimes laughing, but nobody noticed him as he went outside.

He expected to see Deckie and Celie playing tennis, but it was Uncle Howie and Aunt Sissie, Deckie's parents, playing with intense grimaces on their faces as if this were the final battle in a lifelong war. They both dripped with sweat even though the night air here in the Great Smokies was fairly cool.

So where were Deckie and Celie? Not that it mattered. Not that they'd welcome Paulie's company if he found them. Not that he could

even be sure they were together. He knew Deckie was out somewhere because his stuff was still piled on his bed. And the sounds of tennis had made Paulie assume he was playing with Celie. But for all he knew, Celie was in bed with the little girl cousins in the big attic dormitory. Still, he looked for them because at some level he knew they would be together, and for some perverse reason he always had to push and push until he forced people to tell him outright that they didn't want him around. The school counselor had told him this about himself, but hadn't told him how to stop doing it. In fact, Paulie was half-convinced that the counselor had only told him that as an oblique way of letting him know that he, too, didn't want Paulie around anymore.

There wasn't a sound coming from the pool, though the lights were on there, so Paulie didn't bother going in. He just walked the path around the chainlink fence that kept woodland animals from coming to drown in the chlorinated water. It wasn't till Celie giggled that Paulie realized they were in there after all, not swimming but sitting on the edge at the shallow end, their feet in the water, resting on the steps going into the water. Paulie stood and watched them, knowing that he was invisible to them, knowing he would be invisible even if he were standing right in front of them, even if he were walking on the damned water.

Then he realized that Celie was only wearing the bottom part of her two-piece swimming suit. Paulie's first thought was, How stupid, she's only eleven, she's got nothing to show anyway. Then he saw that Deckie had his hand inside the bottom of her swimsuit and he was kissing her shoulder or sucking on it or something, and that's why Celie was laughing and saying, "Stop it, that tickles," and then Paulie understood that Deckie liked it that she didn't have any breasts yet and he knew just what Deckie was and in that moment relief swept over Paulie like a great cleansing wave because he knew now that despite Deckie's beautiful tan and beautiful body and charmed life, Deckie was the sick one and Paulie *didn't* want to be like him after all.

Only then did it occur to him that even though Celie was laughing, what Deckie was doing to her was wrong and for Paulie to stand there feeling *relieved* of all things was completely selfish and evil of him and he had to do something, he had to put a stop to it, then and there, if he was any kind of decent person at all, and if he didn't then he was just as bad as

Deckie because he was standing there watching, wasn't he? And letting it happen.

"Stop it," he said. His voice was a croak and between the crickets and the breeze in the leaves and the thwang, thunk of the tennis match, they didn't hear him.

"Get your hands off her, you asshole!" Paulie yelled.

This time they heard him. Celie shrieked and pulled away from Deckie, looking frantically for the top of her swimsuit, which was floating about ten feet out. She splashed down the steps into the pool, reaching for it, as Deckie stood up, looking for Paulie in the darkness outside the chainlink fence. Their eyes met. Deckie walked around the pool toward him.

"I wasn't doing anything, you queer," said Deckie. "And what were you doing watching, anyway, you queer?"

The words struck home. Paulie answered not a word. They were face to face now, through the chain link.

"Nobody will believe you," said Deckie. "And Celie will never admit it happened. She wanted it, you know. She's the one that took off her top."

"Shut up," said Paulie.

"If you tell anybody, I'll just look disgusted and tell them that you and I quarreled and you warned me you'd do something to get me in trouble. They'll believe me. They know you're a weasel. A sneaking weasel queer."

"You can call me whatever you like," said Paulie. "But you and I both know what you are. And someday you'll mess with somebody's little girl and they won't just call the cops so your family lawyers can get you off, they'll come after you with a gun and blow the suntan right off your face."

Paulie said all that, but not until Deckie was on the other side of the pool, walking into the poolhouse. By then Celie had her top back on and was climbing out of the water. She didn't even turn to look at him. Paulie had saved her, but maybe she didn't want to be saved. And even if she did, he knew that she'd never speak to him again as long as he lived. He'd seen the wrong thing, he'd done the wrong thing, even when he was trying to do the right thing.

He didn't want to go to bed, not with Deckie lying there in the next bed. He thought of taking a swim himself, but the thought of getting in the water they had been using made him feel polluted. He walked away into the brush.



It got dark immediately under the trees, but not so dark he couldn't see the ground. And soon he found a path that led down to the stream, which made that curious rushing, plinking sound like some kind of random musical instrument that was both string and wind. The water was icy cold when he put his bare feet into it. Cold and pure and numbing and he kept walking upstream.

The trees broke open over the stream and moonlight poured down from almost straight overhead. The water had carved its way under some of the trees lining the banks. None had fallen, but many of them cantilevered perilously over the water, their roots reaching out like some ancient scaffolding, waiting for somebody to come in and finish building the riverbank. In the spring runoff or during a storm, all the gaps under the trees would be invisible, but it was the end of a dryish summer and there wasn't that much water, so the banks were exposed right down to the base. If I just lay down under one of these trees, when it rained again the water would rise and lift me up into the roots like a fish up to an octopus's mouth, and the roots would hold me like an octopus's arms and I could just lie there and sleep while it sucked the life out of me, sucked it right out and left me dry, and then I'd dissolve in the water and float down the river and end up in some reservoir and get filtered out of the drinking water and end up getting treated with a bunch of sewage or maybe in a toxic waste dump which pretty much describes my life right now so it wouldn't make much difference, would it?

The bank was higher on the left side now, and it was rocky, not clay. The stone was bone dry and shone ghostly white in the moonlight, except for one place, under a low outcropping, where the rock was glistening wet. When Paulie got closer he could see that there was water flowing thinly over the face of the rock. But how could that be, since all the rock above the overhang was dry? Only when he stooped down did he realize that there wasn't just shadow under that outcropping of stone, there was a cave, and the water flowed out of it. When the stream was high, the cave entrance must be completely under water; and the rest of the time it would be invisible unless you were right down under the overhang, looking up. Yet it was large enough for a person to slither in.

A person or an animal. A bear? Not hibernation season. A skunk? A porcupine? Maybe. So what? Paulie imagined coming home with spines

in his face or smelling like a skunk and all he could think was: They'd have to take me away from here. To the doctor to get the spines out or back home to get the smell of me away from the others. They'd have to ride with him in the car all the way down the mountain, smelling him the whole way.

He ducked low, almost getting his face into the water, and soaking his shorts and the front of his T-shirt. He was right, you *could* get into the cave, and it was easier than it looked at first, the cave was bigger inside than it seemed from the size of the opening. The spring inside it had been eating away at the rock for a long time. And if there was an animal in here, it kept quiet. Didn't move, didn't smell. It was dark, and after a while when Paulie's eyes got used to the darkness it was *still* pitch black and he couldn't see his hand in front of his face, so he felt his way inward, inward. Maybe animals didn't use this cave because the entrance was underwater so much. Bats couldn't use it, that was for sure. And it would be a lousy place to hibernate since there was no getting out during the spring flood.

The water from the spring made a pool inside the cave, not a deep one, but pure and cold. The cleanest water Paulie would ever find in his life, he knew that. He dipped his hand into the water, lifted it to his mouth, drank. It tasted sweet and clear. It tasted like cold winter light. He crawled farther into the cave, looking for a place where he could lie down and dream and remember the taste of this water straight from the stone heart of the earth.

His hand brushed against something that wasn't rock, and it moved.

Paulie knelt there, hardly daring to breathe. No sound. No alarm. No movement of any kind. And he *could* see, just a little bit, just faint dark grays against the black of the background, and there wasn't any motion, none at all. He reached out and touched it again, and it moved again, and then tipped over and thudded softly and now when he handled it he realized it was a shoe, or not really a shoe but a moccasin, the leather dry and brittle, so it broke a little under his hand. Something clattered out of the moccasin when he lifted it up and when he cast around to find whatever it was, he realized it was a lot of things, small hard things, bones from somebody's feet. There was a dead body here. Someone had crawled into this cave and died.

And then suddenly in the darkness he could see, only he wasn't seeing anything that actually lay there. He was seeing an Indian, a youngish man, broad cheekbones, nearly naked, unarmed, fleeing from men on

horseback, men on foot, running up the stream after him, calling and shouting and now and then discharging a musket. One of the musket balls took him, right in the back, right into a lung. Paulie almost felt it, piercing him, throwing him forward. After that he could hardly breathe, his lung was filling up, he was weak, he couldn't run anymore, but there was the cave here, and the water was low, and he had strength enough to climb up under the overhang, taking care not to brush against it and leave a stain of blood from his back. He would lie here and hide until the white men went on and he could come back out and go find his father, go find a medicine man who could do something about the blood in his lungs, only the white men didn't go away, they kept searching for him, he could hear them outside, and then he realized it didn't matter anyway because he was never going to leave this cave. If he coughed, he'd give himself away and they'd drag him out and torture him and kill him. If he didn't cough, he'd drown. He drowned.

Paulie felt the moment of death, not as pain, but as a flash of light that entered his body through his fingertips and filled him for a moment. Then it receded, fled into some dark place inside him and lurked there. A death hidden inside him, the death of a Cherokee who wasn't going to leave his home, wasn't going to go west to some unknown country just because Andrew Jackson said they had to go. He held inside him the death of a proud man who wasn't going to leave his mountains, ever. A man who had, in a way, won his battle.

He knelt there on all fours, gasping. How could he have seen all this? He had daydreamed for hours on end, and never had he dreamed of Indians; never had the experiences seemed so real and powerful. The dead Cherokee's life seemed more vivid, even in the moment of dying, than anything in Paulie's own experience. He was overwhelmed by it. The Cherokee owned more of his soul, for this moment, than Paulie did himself. And yet the Cherokee was dead. It wasn't a ghost here, just bones. And it hadn't possessed Paulie — he was still himself, still the bland nondescript nothing he had always been, except that he remembered dying, remembered drowning on his own blood rather than coughing and letting his enemies have the satisfaction of finding him. They would always think he got away. They would always think they had failed. It was a victory, and that was an unfamiliar taste in Paulie's mouth.

He stretched himself out beside the skeleton of the Indian, not seeing it, but knowing where the bones must be, the long bones of the arms, the ladder of the ribs, the vertebrae jumbled in a row, the cartilage that once connected them gone, dissolved and washed out into the stream many years ago.

And as Paulie lay there another image crept into his mind. Another person splashing through the stream, but it wasn't a sunny day this time, it was raining, it was bitterly cold. The leaves were off the trees, and behind him he could hear the baying of hounds. Could they follow his scent in the rain? Through the stream? How could they? Yet they came on, closer and closer, and he could hear the shouts of the men. "She went this way!"

She. Now Paulie became aware of the shape of the body he wore in this memory. A woman, young, her body sensitive to the chafing of the cloth across her small young breasts. And now he knew what she was fleeing from. The master wouldn't leave her alone. He came at her so often it hurt, and the overseer came after him as soon as he was gone, until finally she couldn't stand it, she ran away, and when they found her they'd whip her and if she didn't die from the lash then as soon as she was half-healed they'd come at her again, only this time she'd be kept chained and locked up and she wasn't going back, never, no matter what.

As she ran up the stream she saw the outcropping of rock and happened to stumble just then and splash on all fours into the icy river and then she looked up and saw that there was a cave and almost without thinking she climbed up into it and lay there shivering with the bitter cold, hardly daring to move, fearful that the chattering of her teeth would give her away. She slid farther up into the cave and then her hand found the half-decomposed leg of someone who had died in that cave and she shrieked in spite of herself and the men outside heard her but they didn't know where the shriek came from. They knew she was close but they couldn't find her and the dogs couldn't catch her scent so she lay there by the corpse of the dead Indian and shivered and prayed that the spirit of the dead would leave her alone, she didn't mean to bother him, she'd go away as soon as she could. In the meantime, she got more and more numb from the cold, and despite her terror at every shout she heard from the men outside, their voices got dimmer and dimmer until all she could hear was

the rushing of the water and she got sleepy and closed her eyes and slept as the stream outside rose up and sealed the entrance of the cave and her breathing drew the last oxygen out of the air so that she was dead before the cold could kill her.

As before, the moment of her death came into Paulie's fingers like an infusion of light; as before, the light filled him, then receded to hide within him; as before, her last memories were more vivid in his mind than anything he had ever experienced himself.

I should never have drunk the water in this cave, thought Paulie. I've taken death inside me. It's a magic place, a terrible place, and now I'm filled with death. What am I supposed to do with this? How am I supposed to use the things I saw and felt and heard tonight? There's no lesson in this — this has nothing to do with my life, nothing to teach me. All that's different is that I know what it feels like to die. And I know that there are some people whose lives were worse than mine. Only maybe that's not even true, because at least they accomplished something by dying in this cave. They had some kind of small victory, and it's damn sure I've never had anything like that in *my* life. Since I'm the source of all my own problems, blundering and babbling my way through the world, who can I run away from in order to get free? This girl, this man who died here, they were lucky — they knew who their enemies were, and even if they died doing it, at least they got away.

He must have slept, because when he woke he was aware of aches and pains all over his body from lying on stone, from sleeping in the cool damp air of the cave. Fearless now of the dead, he felt around until he had traced the Cherokee's whole skeleton, and then, crawled farther in until he found the bones of the girl, the crumbling fabric of her cotton dress. He took a scrap of the dress with him, and a piece of the brittle leather of the Cherokee's moccasin. He put them in his pocket and crawled back to the entrance of the cave. Then he slid down, soaking his pants and shirt again.

The moon was low but it didn't matter, dawn was coming and there was enough light to find his way home, splashing through the stream until he came to the place where he had left his shoes. He wondered if his parents had even noticed he was gone. Probably not. It was damn sure Deckie wouldn't have told them he was missing. If Deckie even went to the room. Still, if they *did* notice he was gone, there might be some kind

of uproar. He'd have to tell them where he was and what he was doing and why his feet and shirt and shorts were wet. He was still trying to think of some kind of lie when he came into the cabin, through the back door because there was a light on in the living room and maybe he could sneak into bed.

But no, there was someone in the kitchen, too, though the light was off. "Who's there?"

Reluctantly Paulie leaned into the kitchen door and saw, to his relief, that it was the nurse who looked after Nana. "I'm making her breakfast," the woman said, "but she's fretful. She moans when she's like that, unless somebody sits there with her, and I can't sit there with her and make her mush too, so would you mind since you're up anyway, would you mind just going in and sitting with her so she doesn't wake everybody up?"

The nurse was all right. The nurse wouldn't get him in trouble. He could hear Nana moaning from the main floor bedroom that had been given over to her so nobody had to carry her frail old body up and down the stairs. The light was on in Nana's room and she was sitting up in her wheelchair, the strap around her ribs so she didn't fall over when the trembling became too strong. Paulie could see the cot where the nurse slept. It was silly, really — the nurse was a large, big-boned woman and the cot must barely hold her, not even room enough to roll over without falling out of bed. While tiny Nana had slept in a huge kingsize bed. It would never have occurred to them, though, that Nana should get the cot. The nurse was of the serving class.

I am of the serving class, too, thought Paulie. Because I have more of my father's blood than my mother's. I don't belong among the rich people, except to wait on them. That's why I never feel like I'm one of them. Just like Father never belongs. We should be their chauffeurs and yard boys and butlers and whatever. We should wait on them and take their orders in restaurants. We should run their errands and file their correspondence. We all know it, even though we can't say it. Mother married down, and gave birth down, too. I should have been on a cot in someone's room, waiting for them to wake up so I could rush down and make their breakfast and carry it up to them. That's how the world is supposed to work. The nurse understands that. That's why she knew she could ask me to help her. Because this is who I really am.

Nana looked at him and moaned insistently. He walked to her, not knowing what she wanted or even if she wanted anything. Her eyes pierced him, sharp and unyielding. Oh, she wants something all right. What?

She looked up at him and started trying to raise her hands, but they trembled so much that she could hardly raise them. Still, it seemed clear enough that she was reaching out to him, staring into his eyes. So he held out his hands to her.

Her hands smacked against one of his. She could no more take hold of him than fly, so he took hold of her, one of her hands in both of his, and at once the trembling stopped, the effort stopped, and the unheld hand fell back into her lap on the wheelchair. "The nurse is fixing your breakfast," Paulie said lamely.

But she didn't answer. She just looked at him and smiled and then, suddenly, he felt that light that was hidden within him stir, he felt the pain in his back again from the musket ball, and now the death of the Cherokee swelled within him and filled him for a moment with light. And then, just as quickly, it flowed out of him, down through his fingertips just the way it had come. Flowed out of him and into her. Her face brightened, she dropped her head back, and as the last of the Cherokee's deathlight left him, she let out a final groan of air and died, her head flopped back and her mouth and eyes wide open.

Paulie knew at once what had happened. He had killed her. He had carried death out of the cave with him and it had flowed out of his hands and into her and she was dead and he did it. He sank to the floor in front of her and the weariness and pain of last night and this morning, the fear and horror of the two long-ago deaths that he had witnessed — no, experienced — and finally the enormity of what he had done to his great-grandmother, all of this overwhelmed him and when the nurse came into the room she found him crying silently on the floor. At once she took the old woman's pulse, then unstrapped her, lifted her out of the chair, and laid her on the bed, then covered her up to her neck. "You just stay there, son," she said to him, and he did, crying quietly while she went back to the kitchen and rinsed the dishes. It occurred to him to wonder that her response to death was not to waken everybody but rather to wash up after an uneaten breakfast. Then he realized: That's what the serving class is for, to clean up, wash up, hide everything ugly and unpleasant.

Hide everything ugly and unpleasant.

I didn't kill her, or if I did, I didn't mean to. And besides she wanted it. I think she saw the death in me and reached for it. I brought her what she couldn't get any other way, release from her family, from her body, from her memories of life unmatched by any power to live. Nobody will be sorry to see her dead, not really. Somebody can move into the Richmond mansion again and become the main bloodline of the Brides. The nurse will get another job and everything will be fine. So why can't I stop crying?

He hadn't stopped crying when the nurse went to waken Mother — even the nurse knew that it was Mother who had to be told first. And even though she held him and murmured to him, "Who could have guessed you'd be so tenderhearted," he couldn't stop crying, until finally he was shaking like the girl in the cave, shivering uncontrollably. I have another death in me, he thought. It's dangerous to come near me, there's another death in my fingers, the cold death of a slavegirl waiting in some cave in my heart. Don't come near me.

Mother and Father left that morning, to take him home and make funeral arrangements in Richmond. Others would take care of arranging for the ambulance and the doctor and the death certificate. Others would dress the corpse. Mother and Father had to take their son who, after all, had found the body. No one ever asked him what he was doing up at that hour, or where he had spent the night, and if anyone noticed that his shirt and pants were damp they never asked him about it. They just packed up his stuff while he sat, tearless now, on the sofa in the parlor, waiting to be taken away from this place, from the old lady who had drawn death out of his fingers, from the people who had jockeyed for position as they waited years for her to die, and from the children who played dark ugly games with each other by the swimming pool when no adult could see.

At last all the preparations were done, the car brought round, the bags loaded. Mother came and tenderly led him out onto the porch, down the steps, toward the car. "It was so awful for you to find her like that," she said to him, as if Nana had done something embarrassing instead of just dying.

"I don't know why I got so upset," said Paulie. "I'm sorry."

"We would have had to leave anyway," said Mubbie, holding the door



open for him. "Even the Brides can't keep a family reunion going when somebody just died."

Mother glared at him over Paulie's head. He didn't even have to look up to see it. He knew it from the smirk on Mubbie's face.

"Paulie!" cried a voice. Paulie knew as he turned that it was Deckie, though it was unbelievable that the older boy would seek a confrontation right here, right now, in front of everybody.

"Paulie!" Deckie called again. He ran until he stopped right in front of Paulie, looking down at him, his face a mask of commiseration and kind regard. Paulie wanted to hit him, to knock the smile off his face, but of course if he tried to throw a punch Deckie would no doubt prove that he had taken five years of boxing or tae kwan do or something and humiliate Paulie yet again.

"Celie and I were worried about you," Deckie said. And then, in a whisper, he added, "We wondered if you stripped off the old lady's clothes so you could look at *her* naked, too."

The enormity of the accusation turned Paulie's seething anger into hot rage. And in that moment he felt the death stir within him, the light of it pour out into his body, filling him with dangerous light, right to the fingertips. He felt the terrible fury of the helpless slave girl, raped again and again, her determination to die rather than endure it anymore. He knew that all he had to do was reach out and touch Deckie and the slavegirl's death would flow into him, so that in his last moments he would feel what a violated child felt like. It was the perfect death for him, true justice. There were a dozen adults gathered around, watching. They would all agree that Paulie hadn't done anything.

Deckie smiled nastily and whispered, "Bet you play with yourself for a year remembering me and Celie." Then he thrust out his hand and loudly said, "You're a good cousin and I'm glad Nana's last moments were with you, Paulie. Let's shake on it!"

What Deckie meant to do was to force Paulie to shake his hand, to humiliate himself and accept Deckie's dominance forever. What he couldn't know was that he was almost begging Paulie to kill him with a single touch. Death seeped out of Paulie, reaching for Deckie. If I just reach out....

"Shake his hand, for heaven's sake, Paulie," said Mother.

No, thought Paulie. Deckie is slime but if they killed every asshole in

the world who'd be left to answer the phones? And with that thought he turned his back and got into the car.

"Paulie," said Mother. "I can't believe..."

"Let's go," said Father from the driver's seat.

Mother, realizing that Father was right and there shouldn't be a scene, slid into the front seat and closed the door. As they drove away she said, "Paulie, the trauma you've been through doesn't mean you can't be courteous to your own cousin. Maybe if you accepted other people's overtures of friendship you wouldn't be alone so much."

She went on like that for a while but Paulie didn't care. He was trying to think of why it was he didn't kill Deckie when he had the chance. Was he afraid to do it? Or was he afraid of something much worse, afraid that Deckie was right and Paulie had enjoyed watching, afraid that he might be just as evil in his own heart as Deckie was? Deckie should be dead, not Nana. Deckie should have been the one whose body shook so much he couldn't stand up or touch anybody. How long would Celie have sat still if Deckie had pawed at her with quivering hands the way that Nana reached out to me? God afflicts all the wrong people.

When they got home they treated Paulie with an exaggerated concern that was tinged with disdain. He could feel their contempt for his weakness in everything they said and did. They were ashamed that he was their son and not Deckie. If they only knew.

But maybe it wouldn't make any difference if they knew. Tanned athletic boys must sow their wild oats. They live by different rules, and if you have such a one as your own child, you forgive him everything, while if you have a child like Paulie, basic and ordinary and forgettable, you have to work all your life just to forgive him for that one thing, for being only himself and not something wonderful.

Mother and Mubbie didn't make him go to the funeral — he didn't even have to plead with them. And in later years, as the family reunion became an annual event, they didn't argue with him very hard before giving in and letting him stay home. Paulie at first suspected and then became quite sure that they were much happier leaving him at home because without him there, they could pretend that they were proud of him. They weren't forced to compare him quite so immediately with the ever taller, ever handsomer, ever more accomplished Deckie.

When they came home, Paulie would leave the room whenever they started going on about Sissie's and Howie's boy. He saw them cast knowing looks at each other, and Mother even said to him once, "Paulie, you shouldn't compare yourself to Deckie that way, there's no need for you to feel bad about his accomplishments. You'll have accomplishments of your own someday." It never occurred to her that by saying this, she swept away all the small triumphs of his life so far.

There were times in the years to come when Paulie doubted the reality of his memory of that family reunion. The light hiding within him stayed dark for weeks and months on end. The memory of the swimming pool faded; so did the memory of Nana's feebly grasping hands. So, even, did the memory of the death of the Cherokee and the runaway slave. But then one day he would move something in his drawer and see the envelope in which he kept the tattered fragment of a threadbare dress and the scrap of an ancient moccasin, and it would flood back to him, right down to the smell of the cave, the taste of the water, the feel of the bones under his hand.

At other times he would remember because someone would provoke him, would do something so awful that it filled him with fury and suddenly he felt the death rising in him. But he calmed himself at once, every time, calmed himself and walked away. I didn't kill Deckie that day. Why should I kill this asshole now? Then he would go off and forget, surprisingly soon, that he had the power to kill. Forget until the next time he saw the envelope, or the next time he was swept by rage.

He never saw Deckie again. Or Celie. Or any of his aunts and uncles or cousins. As far as he was concerned he had no family beyond Mother and Mubbie. It was not that he hated his relatives — except for Deckie he didn't think they were particularly evil. He learned soon enough that his family was, in a way, pretty ordinary. There was money, which complicated things, but Paulie knew that people without money still found reasons to hate their relatives and carry feuds with them from generation to generation. The money just meant you drove better cars through all the misery. No, Paulie's kinfolk weren't so awful, really. He just didn't need to see them. He'd already learned everything they had to teach him. One family reunion was enough for him.





# BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

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## CHARLES DE LINT

*The Marriage of Sticks*, by Jonathan Carroll, Tor Books, 1999, \$23.95.

**W**HILE Jonathan Carroll has been steadily publishing books since 1980, when Viking published his now-classic *The Land of Laughs*, he hasn't published a book in the genre in some time. And since it was the Ace edition of *The Land of Laughs* (published in 1983) that first built his reputation, his returning to the field for his latest release feels a bit like completing a circle.

*The Marriage of Sticks* is classic Carroll: witty, wise, strange, elusive, immediate. What's especially fascinating about a Carroll fantasy is, while the fantastic elements may be outrageous, the real world elements can be even more off the wall. Which, when you think about it, is pretty much the way it works in the world as it is. Yes, a talking

dog is amazing, but the things people do, and the reasons they have for doing them, often feel far more alien and inexplicable.

The story opens with Miranda Romanac, a procurer of rare books, who is drifting through her life until she begins an affair with a married man. Unlike the way this usually plays out in the real world, her lover actually leaves his family to make a life with Romanac. This should be where we cue in the "happily ever after" theme music and cut to the credits — at least that's how Romanac perceives it — but we've only just begun the story.

I'd like to discuss the plot in more detail, but I feel I've given enough away as it is. The best books keep you guessing from the first page, twisting and turning in on themselves with perfect internal logic that only becomes apparent after the surprises are revealed, and *The Marriage of Sticks* is no exception. Suffice it to say that Romanac's life doesn't play out the way either

she, or we, the readers, would have expected. But en route we're treated to a cast of eccentric characters, fantastical situations, secret societies, ghosts of people who never were, and all sorts of other fascinating diversions.

*The Marriage of Sticks* is Carroll's most overt fantasy in some time and it also continues his recent trend of producing endings as satisfying as one could hope for from the quality of how the novels begin and the stories build. Which is what I meant earlier in this review when I said that this is classic Carroll. He hasn't so much stepped back as built upon the strengths of his earlier books to give us something new again.

*Lord Demon*, by Roger Zelazny & Jane Lindskold, Avon, 1999, \$23.

*Lord Demon* is the second of the two books that Roger Zelazny asked Jane Lindskold to complete for him, should he not live to finish them himself. Neither *Lord Demon* nor their earlier posthumous collaboration *Donnerjack* are cobbled-together affairs. Nor is either book a case of a senior author basically adding his name and a few ideas to a junior author's apprentice work. These were works-in-progress that

Zelazny entrusted to Lindskold — with good reason, it turns out, for she's done an exemplary job in both books of capturing and retaining that wonderful gift Zelazny had of headlong invention, mythic characters made human, and deft, deliciously convoluted plotting.

This time out it is the gods and demons of Chinese mythology who get the Zelazny/Lindskold makeover. Kai Wren, the Lord Demon of the book's title, is drawn into a new chapter of the great wars between the demons and gods that first began five thousand years ago. When the book opens, we meet him as a maker of bottles — and such bottles they are, for each can contain a whole world inside it. His latest has taken him a hundred and twenty years to complete. In celebration, his human servant goes out to get a pizza for their dinner, whereupon he is killed by a gang of minor demons.

Wren begins tracking down the murderers of his servant, but all too soon he's pulled into a Byzantine plot the roots of which reach back for thousands of years. He slowly comes to discover that he has been manipulated for centuries and in the end there is no one he can trust except for a pair of humans: a kite maker, and his granddaughter, a *feng*

*shui* expert. With a few other unlikely allies, they have to combat not only the ancient gods, but Wren's own demonkind as well. Along the way, we're treated to wonderfully strange worlds (ever wonder where those lost socks go and why hangers seem to multiply in your closet?) and a fascinating play with certain aspects of Chinese mythology.

As has always been the case with Zelazny's books, and is proving to also be true of Lindskold's solo work, all the characters are fully drawn, rich with textures and contradictions. Even the supporting cast is fully realized. Combine that with the rich background, puzzles that keep deepening, and a plot that won't quit, *Lord Demon* stands as a worthy farewell to one of the best writers this field has produced.

*The Rainy Season*, by James P. Blaylock, Ace Books, 1999, \$21.95

Now I don't want this to be taken wrong, because Blaylock has long been one of my favorite writers, but it always surprises and pleases me how much better each new book is from the one that came before. While he persists in mining the theme of strange doings in

Southern California, it never feels tired or repetitive. His prose continues to mature, his characters are ever more deeply realized, and he's able to blend whimsy and serious goings-on like few other writers working in or out of the fantasy field.

I don't know how he does it, but I'm pleased that he does. I'm also pleased with the way Ace markets his books, combining a literary feel with a strong fantasy element, which pretty much sums up what the books really are. The cover for *The Rainy Season* — clouds shaped like a woman's face, weeping rain — is truly evocative.

This time out, Blaylock is exploring ghosts and time travel, putting his own unique spin on each. The ghosts are, in fact, memories that are stored in various objects and have great value to those collectors who understand their nature. The time travel comes about by way of mysterious wells that fill during the rainy season and allow the veils between time periods to be pierced.

Phil Ainsworth, our protagonist, is aware of none of this as the book opens. He's a nature photographer, living alone in the old house he inherited from his mother. But when he gets the call that his sister

has died and he's become the guardian of his ten-year-old niece Betsy, his world becomes forever changed. This is the rainy season, and there are people prowling about the old well on his property, looking for artifacts and people displaced during previous rainy seasons.

By genre terms, there are few truly evil characters in this, or for that matter any, Blaylock novel. Instead, they're more insidious — the sorts of people we recognize as neighbors, or even in parts of ourselves, who allow their greed and self-centeredness to get in the way of common decency, or morality. Which makes them, to my mind at least, all the more horrifying, since the darkness they cast is all too possible. Ainsworth's life is made increasingly more miserable, not by madmen bent on world domination, nor by monsters, but by his niece Betsy's old babysitter who will stop at nothing to regain the child she feels Ainsworth has stolen from her. Or the pathetic owner of a junkshop who is quite willing to sacrifice Betsy to bring back his own daughter. Or...but you get the idea.

They're pretty much ordinary people, only something in their makeup has rendered them completely amoral. How Ainsworth

deals with them, and also with the wonders that the rainy season brings into his life, makes for an enchanting novel that simply ends too soon. Not because the story isn't complete, but because the reader doesn't want to leave this world that Blaylock has created and is sharing with us.

*A Midsummer Night's Faery Tale*, by Wendy Froud & Terri Windling, Simon & Schuster, 1999, \$18.

This is an utterly charming story of a Puck-like faerie named Sneezle and his adventures on Midsummer Night's Eve when he must find his way to the Heart of the Wood to retrieve Titania's crown from the oldest oak and bring it back to the faerie gathering before an evil sorceress takes the rightful queen's place.

Terri Windling provides the prose, perfectly capturing the voice of an old faerie tale, while Wendy Froud gives us the art. And what lovely art. There are over fifty photographs of her hand-made creations to tell the story, three-dimensional figures as enchanting as the drawings and paintings of her husband Brian.

While it's certainly aimed at the younger reader, *A Midsummer*

*Night's Faery Tale* will readily delight the young at heart as well.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box

9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ☞

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*"Of course I'm feeling uncomfortable. I'm not allowed on the couch."*





# BOOKS

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## JAMES SALLIS

*Beast of the Heartland*, by Lucius Shepard, Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999, \$10.95.

*The Lust Lizard of Melancholy Cove*, by Christopher Moore, Spike/Avon, 1999, \$23.

*Death of a Tango King*, by Jerome Charyn, New York University Press, 1998, \$21.95

**F**OR MOST of us laboring in the vineyards, it's all just wine. And one has to wonder, at this late point in the empire, to what degree tribal economies still obtain. What profit is there, in a world so given to science-fictional imagery, in speaking of science fiction as a world apart? Has the genre as meaningful entity, like country music, vanished in its appropriation by the mainstream, sharp edges swaddled in bunting, the subversive nature at its heart co-opted (as America viti-

ates by absorption every revolutionary urge) by market forces? Is some of the best new work coming from outside the genre, or sideways to the genre, or (rude metaphor that it is) slipping in from behind? Where's that list of microbreweries?

Four Walls Eight Windows, a small "literary" press given to what used to be called avant-garde fiction, has of late increasingly devoted itself to publishing provocative science fiction: Rudy Rucker, Paul Di Filippo, Michael Moorcock. Lucius Shepard's *Beast of the Heartland*, a reissue of 1997's *Barnacle Bill the Spacer*, collects work by one of the finest short-story writers working within science fiction. His title story is a premier example of how mainstream literature may be written with a science-fictional sensibility — so much so, that this straight character study of an aging, near-blind boxer, originally published in *Playboy*, was soon after reprinted in *Isaac Asimov's*.

...

Mears has a dream the night after he fought the Alligator Man. The dream begins with words: "In the beginning was a dark little god with glowing red eyes..." And then, there it stands, hovering in the blackness of Mears' hotel room, a twisted mandrake root of a god, evil and African, with ember eyes and limbs like twists of leaf tobacco.

The reader recognizes at once that he's in the hands of a master. An intensely lyrical writer, Shepard turns out sentences beautifully re-creating those regions where individual and world collide: physical sensation, perception as it struggles towards cognition, language itself. He has a fine vision of the violence inherent both to society and the human soul, of "the ancient, vicious ways" it is our eternal, doomed dream to change. "Barnacle Bill" deals with the reawakening of just such ideals in one violent man, and with the knowledge that good is not always accomplished by those we would think of as good men.

Shepard's fascination is with people at various string-ends — the end of mankind itself, with the Earth destroyed and colonization an abject failure, in "Barnacle Bill"; the

end of talent and social usefulness in "Beast"; the end of all "Human History" in the story of that name, in which our narrator writes:

We need Wall and Kiri now, we need their violent hearts...[but] there'll soon come a time when we don't need them any longer, and maybe that's all we can hope for, that we'll learn to choose our leaders differently, that we won't end up apes or Captains.

"It's there all the time, the tarry stuff that floors your soul," Shepard writes in "Beast" — and that's the stuff that Shepard's people build their homes, their very lives, from.

Most readers will know Christopher Moore for his hip takes on horror themes in *Practical Demonkeeping*, *Bloodsucking Fiends*, *Coyote Blue*, and *Island of the Sequined Love Nun*. Moore puts his novels together in the manner of all great comic routines, cobbling them up out of outrageous situations, broadly drawn characters, cascades of small jokes building off one another, tower getting higher and wilder all the while, wobbling and promising to self-destruct, shower us with junk. He

writes funny, very funny, about what might be pretty grim stuff, yet never loses an essential kindness and deep humanity. Moore has said of Steinbeck, his favorite writer, that Steinbeck wrote about flawed people with great affection and forgiveness, and that this is what he himself aspires to. Moore loves his people, and we do too.

He also loves his monsters, and this time out the monster is Steve, a centuries-old sea serpent drawn to the sadness of Pine Cove, California (scene of Moore's first novel), where the town psychiatrist has taken everyone off psychotropic drugs without their knowledge, and to the slide guitar of his old enemy, bluesman Catfish Jefferson. Steve first tries to mate with a fetching gasoline truck, having a hotter encounter than he'd anticipated, then takes refuge in what we slowly come to realize is a herd of house trailers, shape-shifting into a rough approximation of one but failing to get it quite right.

Meanwhile, local madwoman Molly Michon has just been released by Theophilus Crowe (avocation constable, vocation pothead) after sinking her teeth into a man's calf at the Head of the Slugsaloon. She's working out in her old movie costume of Kendra, Warrior Babe of the

Outland, tossing her sword and doing backflips, when she sees the mushroom cloud from the exploded gasoline truck.

Mutants, she thought. Where there were mushroom clouds, there were mutants, the curse of Kendra's nuked-out world.

Although Molly and Steve, more or less from the moment Steve rolls onto his back and purrs, find their way to a tender relationship, both know the relationship is doomed and in the end, without regrets, and with considerable tenderness still, go their separate ways. There are many fine, funny moments here, as well as broad swings like a breakfast special of "Eggs-Sogoth" and this description of the cafe owner:

Howard Phillips might have been forty, or sixty, or seventy, or he might have died young for all the animation in his face. He wore a black suit out of the nineteenth century, right down to the button shoes, and he was nursing a glass of Guinness Stout, although he didn't look as if he'd had any caloric intake for months.

\*\*\*

With his off-kilter world view and lovable, loony, loopy characters, Moore often reminds me of another fine comic novelist, Peter De Vries. Like Moore's other books, and De Vries's, *Lust Lizard* is about unlikely heroes. Moore gives us, as does all the best comic writing, something beyond jokes, caricature, spinning plates and crazy-tilt towers, something intangible that vanishes whenever we try to look directly at it: some sense, perhaps, that we're still able to rescue from the ever-increasing detritus of our culture a decent, simple humanity.

I'm not at all certain how many readers of this magazine will be familiar with Jerome Charyn's work. He has published a wild array of books — two popular, *sui generis* series of mysteries, literary satire like *The Tar Baby*, the amazing "conjured autobiographies" *Pinocchio's Nose* and *The Catfish Man*, literary novels, a memoir of his mother and of growing up in New York City — with an array of publishers. His latest has been brought out by New York University Press.

*Death of a Tango King's* direct antecedents are *War Cries Over Avenue C* and *Paradise Man*, novels in which one of Charyn's several styles, or modes, came most fully into its own. A particular kind

of supercharged language drives this mode, language pushed almost to the level of hysteria, words, perception and emotion snapping and pulsing audibly, palpably, along the wire. Charyn is a great walker, and it shows in his prose. Phrases or sentences eat up miles and chapters; more happens between paragraphs than in most others' whole stories; entire scenes collapse, as though sucked into black holes, into a single image. This mode aims for hyperreality, for an almost unbearable intensity. *I am not interested in impersonation*, Charyn has said in rejection of mimetic art, *I am interested in hallucination — in finding the magic*.

Touched first by Faulkner, then powerfully by Gabriel García Márquez, Charyn wants the complex textures of life itself, the overlay of mind and world, wants to create a text that becomes itself a kind of life; he yearns to write the endlessly rereadable book. He is, too, a self-admitted ("in some crucial way") moralist, writing of characters whom language will not necessarily save or redeem, but whom it can nonetheless, in some manner, deliver.

*Death of a Tango King* may not be science fiction but definitely lands feet-first within the bounds of fantastic literature. Science fic-

tion readers will find themselves immediately at ease, I suspect, with the novel's peopling of spies and assassins, its paranoia, its confrontation with *otherness* and evocation of an alien society. (In Charyn *every* society is alien.) It contains many of the key elements that bring us to science fiction in the first place.

This may be the only paranoid novel to rival Pynchon. Yolanda, shanghaied as a spy because her cousin Ruben is king of a drug cartel, trains in a scale cardboard model of the city he controls. The drug lord himself is a succession of doubles. The agents she is going in undercover to contact will know her (she is told) because her résumé has been given to them all. Have you ever met Ruben? Yolanda asks on the way in.

"Many times. But you cannot always tell his doubles from Don Ruben. They rob for him, they marry chicas in Ruben's name, they die for him. It has become an entire industry, being Ruben's double. Ten or twenty are born each day."

And elsewhere:

Men appeared on the floor of the rumbeadero in white scarves and high-heeled shoes

that were favored in the barrios. They didn't present themselves as a small family with one face. But she could tell that these were Ruben's doubles.... It was hard to believe that such men would have died for Ruben, or anyone else. They were benefiting from all the doubles around Ruben, and had become the doubles of doubles.

Paranoia, like religion, like surrealism — and, yes, like science fiction or fantastic literature — insists that there is a world behind or to one side of this, the sensible, one. For the paranoid that world is one of terror and suspicion where dearly purchased footholds shift without warning to beartraps and clang shut. For the religious that world is the real one of which this is but a pale shadow. For the surrealist there is terror too, but also, always and most importantly, a strange and alluring beauty.

The science fiction reader, the reader of fantastic literature, engages and rediscovers his world in reading away from it; finds his face in that of the other. My friend Larry Block, long a devotee of ethnic foods, one night after a week of Ethiopian, Tibetan, Afghan and Moroccan cuisine, turned to wife Lynne and

said: "You know, I want something different tonight. I want *Martian* food."

Something different. New spices, new tastes.

We're ready to order now. ♪

## SPECULATIONS

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Scott Bradfield published his first *sf* story while still a teen, but he is probably better known outside the *sf* field than within: his novels *The History of Luminous Motion*, *Animal Planet*, and *What's Wrong with America?* have garnered much acclaim in various literary circles. His edgy stories, many of which satirize modern life in California, have appeared in a wide variety of magazines and anthologies, including *TriQuarterly*, *Interzone*, *Off Limits*, and *Conjunctions*; they have been collected in *The Secret Life of Houses*, *Dream of the Wolf*, and *Greetings from Earth*.

Few writers at work today can rival Scott Bradfield's mastery of the talking animal story (or "Beast Fable" or "Animal Fantasy," if you're poking around in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*). His first story for us is one such tale, a skewed look at family matters courtesy of Dazzle the dog. If you're curious about Dazzle's first appearance, it was published in the anthology *Other Edens II* and reprinted in *The Secret Life of Houses*.

# Dazzle Redux

By Scott Bradfield

**D**ESPITE ALL THE BURRS and bad weather, Dazzle lived a good life in the woods. He ate plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, learned to take one day at a time, and raised the gangly pups of his common-law wife Edwina with as much genuine affection as if they were his very own. There were times, however, when Dazzle found that being a decent father figure took more patience than he could muster. And no matter how hard he tried to restrain himself, he couldn't stop telling everybody what to do.

"No, no, *no*," Dazzle told the twins for about the zillionth time that morning. "Let's try it again, okay? *This* is a rectangle. *This* is a rhomboid. And *this* is a circle." Dazzle sketched the shapes in the powdery red dirt as he spoke them, trying to show the twins that geometry was as graspable as any bone, stick or rock. "Okay, Heckle, let's pretend I've sent you on a top-secret assignment. You're supposed to go down to the Land of Men and bring me a Frisbee. Have you got that, Heckle? Do you know what a Frisbee is?"

Heckle, who had been warming his cold nose under the nipped convexity of sister Jeckle's gravid belly, sat up with a start. He licked his wet lips hungrily.

"Just show me that Frisbee," Heckle snapped. "I'll whip that sucker out of the sky, no problem."

"Okay, boy," Dazzle continued. "Now take a deep breath and look at the three shapes I've drawn. And tell me — which one's the shape of a Frisbee? Show me the circle. The circle is the *shape* of a Frisbee. Point to the circle and you win the game."

Dazzle spoke evenly in short compact sentences, as if he were marking a trail with bright red beads. But no matter how clearly Dazzle pointed the way, Heckle never managed to keep up for very long.

"A circle is *like* a Frisbee?" Heckle wondered out loud, mewling and starting to twitch. "But not a Frisbee, really? A circle's a space on the ground when a Frisbee's not there? So what the hell do I want with a circle, anyway? Why can't I have a Frisbee instead?"

"You're thinking too hard, Heckle," Dazzle warned. "Relax, take a deep breath, and point to the circle. You can do it, boy. So do it for me now."

"This is *not* the Frisbee!" Heckle declared with a pounce. "Here it's *not*! This *isn't* it here!" Heckle was so slavery with confusion he looked as if he had just chewed a frog. Within moments he had pawed the rhomboid completely out of existence — both metaphorically and literally.

Times like this Dazzle felt like wandering down to PCH and hurling himself under the first eighteen-wheeler that came along.

"Not quite, Heckle," Dazzle pronounced finally, with all the parental patience he could muster. "But at least you pointed to a geometric figure, and not a dead beetle like last time. So what say we sleep on it, and take another shot in the morning. As I've told you before — Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* wasn't written in one day."

"Maybe I'm not all I should be in the Family Skills Department," Dazzle confessed that night to his erstwhile mate, Edwina. "But getting through to those kids of yours is like having a conversation with a block of wood, I swear. If I try to instruct them in the most basic math and



science skills, they're not interested. If I try to teach them which way to look when crossing the street, they're still not interested. If I try to point out the most obvious cultural contradictions of multinational capitalism, why, forget about it. They're *really* not interested. If you can't eat it or fuck it, it's not important, that's their attitude. And you want to know what pisses me off most? They just may be *right*. Maybe fucking and eating *really are* the *ne plus ultra* of canine development. And in the long run of history, *I'm* the biggest boob in town."

Dazzle's mate Edwina was a pretty faithful bitch (at least since menopause, anyway) and had long provided Dazzle everything he considered crucial to a long-term relationship. She never questioned his judgment. She rarely bit him hard enough to draw blood. And she never once kicked him out of bed for snoring. At the same time, though, Edwina wasn't the sort of dog who knew how to hold up her end of a conversation. In fact, whenever Dazzle started pouring out his most heartfelt anxieties, she promptly curled into a fetal ball and fell fast asleep.

"Growwwl," Edwina muttered, while the whites of her eyes flickered out the weird morse of dreams. "Wolves aren't welcome 'round these parts. And neither are you mailmen."

Nevertheless, Dazzle found something infinitely comforting about a good night's sleep with Edwina. Her ambient heat soothed the knots in his shoulders, and her inattention dissolved the perplexities in his brain. As a result, Dazzle awoke every morning filled with fresh intentions and resolve.

"I'm going to be more understanding and thoughtful," Dazzle would assure himself, performing his ablutions in the piney-smelling creek. "And I won't be so quick to lose my temper, either." But once Dazzle had shaken himself dry with a few soul-rattling shivers and climbed back up the flinty hill, his resolutions always vanished with the breeze. He saw his lazy foster progeny licking themselves around the extinguished campfire. He smelled the unburied heaps of sour bones and dead mice. And he heard the casual yips of random lovemaking fill the rough-hewn settlement with a sort of ambient hum. ("Roll over, sweetheart," or "You kids go chase a gopher or something. Mum and Dad need a little alone time — dig?") If there was one thing that really got Dazzle's dander up, it was watching his fellow dogs take the best things in life for granted, such as

liberty, well-stocked provisions, and properly functioning reproductive organs. Perhaps this was because Dazzle had to work hard making it possible for his extended-family members to never have to work too hard for themselves. Or perhaps it was because when Dazzle was little, a hasty vet lopped his balls off with a scalpel.

"Come on, guys!" Dazzle barked. "Wake up and smell the coffee, will you? You can't lie around in your own filth all day, sniffing your smelly scrotums. Here, why don't I show you grandpups how to build a fire, or gather blueberries, or even compose a sestina. I mean, what good is all this free time if you don't know how to use it? And you, Heckle, don't try skulking into those bushes. I want you to sit down right this minute and draw me a parabola. You're gonna learn your basic geometry, pal, or my name ain't Dazzle the Dog."

**E**VENTUALLY, DAZZLE got himself so wound up that none of the other dogs would talk to him. The males wouldn't sniff the trees he pissed on. The bitches wouldn't roll over submissively when he sauntered by for a chat. And even the chirpiest grandpups wouldn't sport playfully with him in the dewy grass, since they knew that even when Dazzle pretended to be fun-loving, he was almost always nursing yet another endless lecture on one of his favorite topics, such as "Why Dogs Shouldn't Eat Their Own Vomit," or "How Will Humans Ever Respect Dogs If Dogs Never Respect Themselves?" In fact, the only dog who could bear Dazzle's company anymore was Edwina. And this was because Edwina never stayed awake long enough to figure out what Dazzle was trying to say.

"I know I don't talk much about my family," Dazzle confessed to her one night in a whisper. "But maybe I should, since sometimes I feel it's my dead history that keeps holding me back. I mean, if my old man hadn't pissed off when I was born, I might have learned a little something about being a good dad myself. Instead, I'm always trying to overcompensate. To be better, to act wiser, to prove myself more dependable and trustworthy than some guy I never knew. I guess what I'm trying to say, honey, is that the ones who suffer most for my screwed-up family-history are the pups and grandpups. And they're not even the ones I'm mad at. The one I'm *really* mad at is myself."

...

Over succeeding days and weeks, Dazzle tried counting to ten, positive thinking, and just plain walking away. But no matter how hard he tried to restrain himself, he couldn't seem to go ten minutes without bossing his fellow dogs into a tizzy. Pretty soon the role of benevolent despot became as confining to Dazzle as any basement garage or backyard fence. And Dazzle, who couldn't bear the notion that he might be denying anybody (especially himself) true freedom, decided it was time to take another trip into the world.

"Basically," Dazzle told his assembled foster progeny on the day he departed for L.A., "I want you guys to stick together until I get back. Try not to eat so much red meat, keep an eye on your crazy Mom, and don't let the pups go wild on you. Jeckle, stop hanging with coyotes. Stan, if you took a bath every few days or so, that rash of yours would clear up, no problem. And if for some reason I *don't* return from this ridiculous quest of mine, I want you all to know that I love you, and I'm sorry if I've been a temperamental old cuss the last few months or so. I guess there're still a few things I need to figure out in my life, and if I don't figure them out now, I probably never will. Oh, and one last thing. I've hidden the Cheetos under a blue log by the river, so do me a favor, will you — "

But before Dazzle could deliver his final instructions, the entire assembled clan of fosterpups and grandpups took off in one shaggy collective flash. They didn't even pause long enough to woof good-bye. They just disappeared over the first low rise and were gone.

Dazzle tried not to feel hurt or disappointed. Dogs, after all, were dogs. And by their very nature, dogs would do anything for a Chee-to.

"Try to save a few till I get back," Dazzle concluded softly through the swirling haze of dandruffy dog hairs. "Name-brand snack food doesn't grow on trees."

"I guess I'm what you'd call your basic stay-at-home individual," Dazzle's dad confessed on the morning his estranged son appeared on his doorstep. "I like to sleep every night on the same blanket, make my daily rounds pissing on the same posts, and pretty much eat out of the same garbage cans every day of my existence. And with the exception of the occasional bitch in heat that staggers my way, I consider the high point of

my life to be a really good bowel movement. Rock hard, intact, clean cut at both ends. I mean, what else *is* there? Sure, I sowed my share of wild oats in my day. But now I just want to be left alone to my memories, my naps, and my unbelievably pleasurable flatulence. Which, by the way, brings me to my next point, Mr. Doozle. Or did you say your name was Dizzle?"

"Dazzle," Dazzle replied weakly, trying not to look hurt.

"Whatever. Way I look at it, see, is maybe you could step back from my doorway just a tad. And pardon my involuntary growl — it's just I've got this weird territorial thing about my front stoop. Not that I actually doubt your claim of kinship, mind you. But turn around slowly, that's it, and keep your paws where I can see them...."

Times like this, Dazzle didn't feel embarrassed for himself. He felt embarrassed for his entire canine species.

"Ah yes," Dazzle's dad said, sniffing around in his son's private parts like a pig rooting out truffles. "That's definitely a smell I recognize. And yes. That's a smell I recognize, too."

"Things happened at the pound, Pop. You never gave me a chance to explain."

But of course it was already too late. Dazzle's dad emitted an abrupt snort of amazement and fell back, plop, onto his gray flat haunches. His ice-cold nostrils flared.

"Jesus Christ, son. Somebody's chopped off your balls!"

Dazzle sighed with a sad little shiver.

"Tell me about it," Dazzle said.

Pop invited Dazzle to spend the night in his sheltered alleyway outside a condemned Pizza Hut, and even offered to share some of his moldier blankets and food-stuffs. But he refused to acknowledge any moral responsibility for Dazzle's life. Or manifest the slightest degree of remorse.

"One thing I simply won't allow," Pop said, "and that's for you to make me feel bad about myself. Life's a mess, whichever way you look at it, and us dogs got to do anything necessary to get by. Sometimes it means sucking up to human beings. Other times it means turning our backs on one another. In a better world, son, sure, I'd have stuck around, taught you a few things, provided for you and your sisters the best I knew how. But

the world doesn't always allow us to do what we're *supposed* to. Sometimes we have to settle for what we *must* do instead."

All his life, Dazzle had considered language a means of opening up new vistas. It came as quite a surprise, then, to learn how effectively it could be deployed as a form of embargo. Especially if you were as good at it as Dazzle's dad.

"So why didn't you keep an eye on us, Pop?" Dazzle asked his father from time to time. "We were right down the street, living in a hole Mom dug behind the Lucky Market. All you had to do was walk down the street and say hello."

Dazzle's dad issued sighs like exclamations. He wasn't trying to make points, exactly. Instead, he was expressing the hard, breathy futility of saying anything at all.

"Your mom didn't want me around, sport. It would only have upset her."

"But what about after Mom went away? Why didn't you come visit then?"

"Because by that point you didn't want to see me anymore. And besides, I'd taken up with this wild bitch from Vanowen. You wouldn't have wanted me to abandon my responsibilities to *her*, now, would you?"

Sometimes, when Dazzle's inquiries grew a little bristly, Pop would shut off every avenue to discourse with a generic injunction. "No use rehashing the same refried beans," Pop would say. Or even: "Why don't we get some sleep and talk about it in the morning."

Dazzle's dad had grown so radically dissociated from his own feelings over the years that he didn't have any idea what terrible shape he was really in. He rarely bathed or picked up after himself. He ate nothing but day-old junk food foraged out of back alley bins. And he never listened to a single word anybody tried to tell him, especially if it might do him a world of good.

Every morning Dazzle's dad woke with the dawn, lapped dirty water from a blocked drain, and set off for his diurnal scrounge through the neighborhood alleyways. Meanwhile, Dazzle trailed along dutifully like a cynical Boswell.

"Well, what have we here," Dazzle's dad would proudly proclaim, as if he had just discovered the Northwest Passage, or a cure for distemper. "Looks to me like a good-sized chunk of a Double-Bacon-Cheeseburger,

still with a few crispy fries attached to this melted cheese here, mmm. And if I remember correctly, son, you said we shouldn't even look in this can, right?"

Or: "Let's face it. Dogs are stupid and human beings aren't. That's why dogs live in ditches and eat garbage, and human beings live in classy homes, and can visit the McDonald's drive-thru any damn time they please. I'm not trying to blow my own trumpet, kid, but you and I are rocket scientists compared to your normal breed of dog. So complain all you want about my lousy child-rearing techniques. Without my brains, you'd have ridden off with the first dogcatcher that came along with a biscuit. Just like your poor stupid mom."

Or: "Let's wander past this empty lot for a moment and see...ah, there he is. Inside that sewer drain resides Mad Dingo Dog, most completely unreasonable animal creature I've ever met. Best if you stay out of this neighborhood altogether, son. Lesson number one of urban living is don't worry about the human beings. Instead, keep on the lookout for your fellow dogs."

Dear Edwina,

If you could read and I could write, I'd probably send you a letter much like the one you're holding in your paws right now. Visiting Dad has turned out to be a total bummer. In fact, I've never met anybody so shut down and disaffected in my entire life. All Dad does these days is eat chocolate donuts, sleep, and evade the local dogcatcher.

I hope everything is okay with you and the kids. I'd tell you to give everybody my love, but knowing dogs, I'm pretty sure they've completely forgotten me now that my rear isn't around to be sniffed. But despite my frequently cranky moods, I want you to know that I really miss my life with you out there in the woods. And I sincerely hope you'll all still be there when I get back.

Love,  
Dazzle

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Despite all his talk about free-thinking individualism, years of bad faith had worn Pop's identity down to the nub. If he wasn't ranting about the SPCA or the poor quality of corporate-produced fast-franchise donuts, he hardly had enough energy left anymore to lick his own scrotum. There were times, in fact, when Dazzle's dad lay motionless on the concrete floors of his apartment for hours, just staring morosely at the cobwebby pointillism of dead flies on the wall.

"What's bothering you, Pop?" Dazzle would ask, testing his dad for movement the same way curious children poke dead rabbits in the road with a stick. "What are you thinking about? Want to let me in on the big secret, huh?"

"Nothing at all, son. Nothing I can't deal with, anyway."

"Don't you get lonely sometimes? Locked up in your own head like that?"

"Life is something you get through one day at a time, son. Stiff upper lip and all that."

"Why don't you try talking about it, Pop? When I'm feeling blue, I talk to Edwina and it helps. Even when she doesn't understand a single word I'm trying to say."

"Talking about things doesn't make them better," Dazzle's dad replied simply, closing his eyes and scratching serenely behind one ear. "Now if you don't mind, I think it's time for my afternoon nap."

Some days Dazzle felt as if he were sniffing around the perimeter of a vast black moat filled with man-eating crocodiles. In the center of the moat stood a tall brooding castle, elaborate with Gothic figurines and hand-carved paraphernalia. Dazzle knew his dad was standing in the middle of this castle, waiting for someone to let him out. But it was impossible to let Dad out until Dad showed Dazzle the way *in*. Dazzle's dad didn't seem to understand his predicament one bit.

Then one afternoon Dazzle went for a lonely walk through the streets of his remote, blissless puppyhood. Fences, walls, garbage bins, stray auto parts, oil-stained asphalt, bricked-over windows and board-hammered doorways. So far as Dazzle could figure, the civilized world was filled with tacky diversions that led you places you didn't want to go. It was kind of like being lost in a maze where all the avenues were rigged with electric

wires — zap, zap. Every choice was a bad choice. And every bad choice led you to believe that it was all your fault.

"Too much dualism," Dazzle decided, "can drive anybody nuts. Even a fairly intelligent individual like Pop."

Eventually Dazzle found himself loitering outside the ramshackle, slanty hut of Dad's weird neighbor, Mad Dingo Dog, and wondering if anybody was home. Dazzle was beginning to miss the company of other dogs, even if they weren't especially bright or loquacious. At least Edwina and the kids speak the truth as clearly as their crude tongues allow, Dazzle reflected fondly. But these shutdown alpha males like Pop, Jesus. Get me out of here.

Dazzle was so mired in his own disconsolate reflections that he didn't even notice he was no longer alone. At first he felt hairs bristle on the nape of his neck. Then, with an involuntary growl, he looked up.

Mad Dingo Dog had a warty, prolonged face, tufted with gray whiskers. He squinted at Dazzle for a moment. Then took a perfunctory sniff at the intervening air.

"Why, I'll be a pussy's uncle," Mad Dingo Dog exclaimed. "You smell just like my long lost nephew, Dazzle!"

**T**HE WEIRD THING was, Dazzle never even knew he had an uncle. And yet from the moment they met, the two of them caught on like a house afire.

"Yeah," Mad Dingo Dog confessed, "your old man's a real piece of work. But one thing's for certain — he's always been real proud of you. 'My son got himself out of this rat-race,' he's always bragging. 'My son was too good for this dump so he split.' 'My son this and my son that.' Jeez, the old fart never stops talking about you. So what are you doing back in the Valley, for Christ's sake? I heard you had your own condo in the woods, soapy hot tub and everything. And you were running the world's first all-canine high-tech retail outlet, or something crazy like that."

Hearing all this exaggerated gossip about himself made Dazzle feel meager by comparison. After all, Dazzle didn't want to talk about himself. Dazzle wanted to talk about *him*.

"Maybe I misunderstood what Dad was trying to say," Dazzle ventured



after a while. "But the way Dad tells it, he and I are the only halfway-intelligent dogs on the entire planet. And you're this crazy, rabid guy who howls at the moon, and keeps trying to steal all his best donuts."

Mad Dingo Dog couldn't help smiling. It resembled an allergic twitch.

"Yeah, well," Mad Dingo Dog concluded wistfully. "That certainly sounds like your old man, now, doesn't it?"

By the time Dazzle returned to Dad's condemned basement, he found a dogcatcher's van parked in the alley, and a pale, overweight dogcatcher leaning into Dad's doorway with a Milk Bone dog biscuit.

"Come here, old soldier," the dogcatcher was saying, "and I'll take you to the land of milk and honey. Free dog chow, plenty of furry friends to keep you company, and at the end of the day, a bonus injection of this really fine medication I've put aside especially for you. No more loneliness, bud. No more wondering what it's all about. So come along, boy, that's a good dog, one more step, then another. Come get your dog biscuit. Then I'll drive you to the pound and teach you what real peace is all about."

In back of the idling white van a mangy assortment of alley strays were scrambling all over one another trying to get out. They yelped and howled and woofed and barked.

"Don't listen to him, guy!" an old gray bulldog cried, pawing the grated window. "It's hell in here! The whole place smells like disinfectant, and there aren't any decent places to go to the bathroom!"

Dazzle stood and contemplated this weird scenario for a moment. His dad, the dogcatcher, strays in a van, and the hot Encino sun staring implacably down. He could barely hear Dad's whisper through the distant swish of traffic on 101, but even so, it registered clearly in Dazzle's brain. It was as if Dad weren't responding to the dogcatcher at all. He was simply telling his son what both of them needed to know.

"I don't want it to hurt," Dad whispered. His voice approached the inner doorway of his hovel, but only his rubbery black nose peeped out. "I just want to go somewhere I don't have to think or feel guilty. And where nothing that happens is ever my fault."

"We'll give you oodles of peace and quiet, old boy," the dogcatcher replied softly. He spoke with the glib confidence of a man who knew he

was good at his job. "We'll take you to a place where you don't have to think about anything anymore."

"I thought I'd leave my apartment to my son. I don't think he wants me around anyway. I'm not sure, but I think I'm starting to get on his nerves."

"It's time for the old to make way for the new, pal. You come with me and I'll take care of everything."

For a brief moment, Dazzle thought Dad should make this particular decision for himself. But at the same time, being a radical civil libertarian, Dazzle couldn't stand to see the public service sector impinging on anybody's personal freedom. So without a second thought, Dazzle snuck over to the municipal-issue van, climbed into the driver's seat, and activated the emergency door-release with his paw. Behind him in the crowded cabin, the hairy clamor ceased.

Then, with a faint clang, the rear doors swung miraculously open.

"I don't know about the rest of you guys," the bulldog interposed. "But I'm outta here."

Wild dogs poured from the back of the van like marbles from the mouth of a jar, ricocheting off one another in every direction. The dogcatcher was so startled that he dropped his dog biscuit and banged his knee on the curb.

"Wait! Stop! Bad dog! Bad dog!" He was issuing shotgun proclamations and running down the alley. Eventually he turned the far corner and disappeared.

"Bad dogs to you, maybe," Dazzle responded softly, to nobody but himself. "But to my way of thinking, they're just doing what dogs gotta do."

That night, after a lackluster celebratory bash of chocolate donuts and Diet Tab, Dazzle finally told his dissociative old dad the news.

"I'm sorry, Pop," he said, "but I can't stand to see you do this to yourself anymore. I had these illusions, right, that maybe we'd reach some sort of reconciliation, and you'd even come home with me to the woods. But I now realize that you're so tied up in your endless routines and bad faith that you'll never let go. So what I'll do, see, is tell your grandkids you died. I'll tell them you sent your love, but that you rolled over and died

shortly after I found you. I'll tell them you got hit by a car, or developed lung cancer from the smog, or got shot in the butt by some spoiled kid with a BB gun. I'll use you as an example, Pop, of what urban America can do to a dog, and if we're lucky, maybe none of our semi-progeny will ever stumble into this hell-hole you can't seem to leave. I won't kiss you good-bye or anything, but just say thanks for your hospitality and get my poor frazzled butt out of here. If I start now, I can maybe hit Ventura by morning."

Dazzle finished having his say with an expiring sigh. Ahh, Dazzle thought. I wasn't even angry or anything. I just had to tell him good-bye.

Dazzle's dad had been looking a little shaken since his encounter with the dogcatcher, and he sat watching his son with a slightly cocked expression, as if he heard tasty birds singing somewhere.

Dazzle had a tear in his eye as he went to the door. Over one shoulder he wore a painstakingly adjusted backpack which contained a cheese sandwich, a stale jelly donut, and a half-liter bottle of Evian.

"So what is it, Pop?" Dazzle asked his father at the verge of the weedy doorway. "Am I taking off and you've got nothing to say? Don't lose the moment, Pop. I've lost a few moments in my life and I can promise you. You never get them back."

Dazzle's dad considered. Then, for the first time in his life, he finally told his son what was really on his mind.

"Grandkids?" Dazzle's dad said. "You never said anything about grandkids."

So Dazzle took his dad home to the high mountains, where they never exchanged any true, heartfelt words ever again. After all, there's plenty of sunshine and fresh air to keep you occupied in the mountains. And sometimes talk just gets in the way of living.

"I guess I'll never be a perfect father," Dazzle confessed to Edwina one night, gazing out at the sky littered with stars. "Or a perfect son, either, for that matter. And when I die, there may not be another dog in the entire world who knows how to light the evening fire, or record the day's events for posterity. But history belongs to each generation to figure out for itself, so there's no point in me getting all worked up about things I can't change. Sometimes, old girl, a dog needs to stop wrestling with the world long

enough to get on with the simple fact of being. Like you and me, Edwina. Being together — nose to haunch and haunch to nose."

It was a miraculous summer that Dazzle would remember fondly all his life. The pups grew progressively leaner, brighter and more independent. Brisk sea-winds kept the white sun cool. And wild wolves occasionally drifted into the orbit of their encampment, lured by aromas of toasted marshmallows and bitches in heat. It was a summer of perfect somnolence and irreflection. Except, of course, when it came to Dazzle's immutable dad.

"For crying out loud!" Dazzle's dad was often heard exclaiming through the warm, fir-scented air. "It's a rhomboid, for Christ's sake! Don't you idiots know what a *rhomboid* is?"

But of course it was one of the miracles of that particular summer that nobody ever figured out what a rhomboid was. Nobody even cared. ¶

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*Several months ago, we brought you Steve Tem's first inquiry into the creepy locale known as "Halloween Street." (That story, incidentally, will serve as the title tale in Mr. Tem's first German-language story collection.) Now that jack-o-lanterns are in season, we return to that familiar and unsettling address.*

# Tricks & Treats

## One Night on Halloween Street

*By Steve Rasnic Tem*

### TRICKS

IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE THE last time they'd all go trick or treating together, but it didn't seem right that the gang go out now that Tommy was dead.

Every year all the gang had gone trick or treating together: Allison and Robbie, Maryanne and John, Sandra and Willona and Felix and Randall. And Tommy. They'd been doing it since fourth grade. Now they were teenagers, and they figured this was the last time. The last chance to do it up right.

Not that they'd ever done anything particularly malicious on Halloween. A few soaped windows. A few mailboxes full of cow shit. Not much more than that.

But Tommy had said this particular Halloween needed to be special. "For chrissakes, it's the last time!"

But then Tommy had died in that big pileup on the interstate. They'd all gone to the funeral. They'd seen the casket lowered into the ground, the

earth dark as chocolate. It wasn't like in the movies. This movie, Tommy's movie, would last forever. Sandra kept saying that word, "forever," like it was the first time she'd ever heard it.

The dead liked playing tricks. She figured that out quick. Dying was a great trick. It was great because people just couldn't believe it. You'd play the trick right in front of their eyes and they still just couldn't believe it.

He'd only been dead a week when Sandra wondered if Tommy's life itself had been a trick. She couldn't remember his face anymore. Even when she looked at pictures of him something felt wrong. Tommy had this trick: he was never going to change, and because he didn't change she couldn't remember what he looked like.

Sandra and Willona had both had crushes on Tommy. And now he was going to be their boyfriend forever. He used to take them both to the horror shows, even the ones they were too young for. He knew places he could get them in. Sandra thought about those shows a lot — she figured Willona did, too. Tommy loved the horror shows. Now he was the star of his own horror show that played in their heads every night. He'd always be with them, because they just couldn't stop thinking about him.

Sometimes it felt so great just to be alive, now that somebody you knew was dead. Sandra thought that must be the ugliest feeling in the world, but it was real. That was what Halloween was all about, wasn't it? Remembering the dead and celebrating hard because you weren't one of them.

Tommy had liked Halloween the best of all of them — he'd been the one who'd organized all their parties, the one who'd come up with the tricks they would play. So this last night as they went door to door they thought of him when they called out "Trick or treat!" They thought of him while they munched on the candy on their way to the next house, like they were eating his memory a piece at a time.

Halloween Street was always the last place to go. It was traditional. You could play the best tricks on Halloween Street, too, since none of the neighbors ever came out to bother you. You could just do whatever you pleased.

Sandra led the way to the first house on the street: a tall thing missing most of its roof and leaning toward the rest of the block like it was drunk.

She knocked on the door and knocked on the door until finally they gave up and started to go away. But as they turned away the door opened and oranges came rolling out for all of them. They put them into their sacks and walked on down the street.

At the next house, a wide place with fire damage on the outside walls, Willona did the knocking. An old man with no teeth gave each of them a peanut butter log and then they left and walked on down the street.

The middle two houses looked even emptier than the others, twins that seemed to be looking at each other all the time with small window eyes. Maryanne and John knocked at both houses and at each house one of the old twin brothers who lived there gave them a box of raisins.

By the time they all got to the end of the street the sacks were getting heavy, unbelievably heavy, and Sandra insisted that they sit down to rest. The gang sat in a circle and reached into their sacks for the goodies.

When Sandra looked into her sack her orange had turned into Tommy's head, bleeding from a gash that crossed the crown of his head.

When Willona reached into her sack for the peanut butter log she found a slippery finger instead, Tommy's ring wedged on it so tightly she couldn't get it off no matter how hard she tried.

What John and Maryanne found in their sacks when they went looking for the raisins was a mass of black insects, each one carrying a small pale bit of Tommy's broken flesh.

But the gang never said a word to each other about what they had found, nor did they show any alarm on their faces. They went on munching and smacking their lips, giggling to themselves because it was so good to be alive on this the final Halloween of their childhoods.

And thinking about how this was Tommy's last trick on them — and what a grand trick it was! — and how this was their last trick on Tommy.

## THE INVISIBLE BOY

J.P. was acting stupid again. Susan was sorry she'd brought him along, as usual, but she never had any choice anyway. J.P. always went where he wanted to go, and unfortunately the places he wanted to go always seemed to be the places she wanted to go.

She tried to walk as far away from him as possible so that maybe

people wouldn't know that he was her brother. But people always knew anyway. Like she had a big sign: J.P.'S SISTER, painted on her forehead.

He looked so stupid in his regular streetclothes on Halloween night. That yellow shirt and those brown corduroy pants he always wore. Always. He never took them off, and she didn't think he ever washed them. It made her mad that Mom let him get away with stuff like that.

J.P. was so ignorant. *I'll be the invisible boy*, he said, and laughed that stupid horse laugh of his. *I'll wear my same old clothes but I'll be the invisible boy so that no one can see me!*

"J.P., you're so ignorant!" she'd said but he'd just laughed at her. That stupid laugh. Here she'd worked forever on her fairy princess costume — it had wings and everything — and her brother thought he could be the invisible boy just by saying he was the invisible boy.

*You can't see me!* he'd said.

"J.P., that's dumb! Of course I can see you! You're wearing that stupid yellow shirt and those stupid brown pants and no way are you an invisible boy!"

He'd looked worried then. *Don't tell anybody you can see me, then...don't tell or you'll ruin everything!*

It made her mad when he asked her that because he knew she could never tell him no. He always took advantage of her. It made her feel stupid, too.

"Okay okay...let's just go."

So they started across the street just as a car was coming across the bridge onto Halloween Street when J.P. turned to her and started making faces just like he always did. And Susan started screaming just like she always did.

And the car passed through J.P., the headlights trapped inside him for a second like he was burning smoke, just like it always did.

J.P., the Invisible Boy, turned around and looked at her and laughed that stupid horse laugh of his before jumping backwards onto the sidewalk and then walking backwards like that all the way up Halloween Street.

J.P. was so ignorant.

## SACK LUNCH

He was just a little boy but he carried the biggest treat sack any of the



kids had ever seen. It grew out of his hands like a big dark hole and it reached to the ground and even dragged behind him for several feet.

Some of the big boys thought it was silly — he looked crazy dragging that big sack around, almost tripping over it every second and stepping on it all the time. But what if he got more candy because he was such a little boy carrying such a great big sack? Adults were funny that way — they might think it was cute.

So they stopped him, and they took the big sack away from him, and just for a moment they considered dropping it and running away because the sack was so light, and felt so strange in their hands — like an oily cloud as it rose and drifted and hummed as the October wind wrapped it around them.

But they just had to look inside.

Later, when the little boy picked the big sack up out of the street it felt just a little heavier, and there were harsh whispers inside, briefly.

## SWEET & SOUR

The boy loved the taste of sweet and sour. Sweet, then sour. Sour, then sweet. Ice cream, then pickles. Lemons, then peaches.

"That's the way of things," his daddy used to tell him. "You wouldn't know the good without the bad to compare it to." His daddy used to say that over and over to him, like some kind of preacher with his sermon. But his daddy just had no idea. Why was one thing good and the other thing bad? Sweet and sour. It was just another flavor, another kind of taste.

Grapefruit and strawberries. Kisses and slaps. Silk and razor blades. Living and dying.

The boy was too old to be out trick or treating. He knew that but he liked the candy too much. He had a sweet tooth. He had a sour tooth.

That night on Halloween Street he was having the best time. Hardly anyone seemed to be home in those houses but he didn't care. There were lots of little kids running up and down that street with their silly store-bought costumes and their grocery sacks full of treats.

He helped one little kid pick up all his spilled candy. He took another kid's mask off and threw it in the creek. He cut a little girl's arm with the penknife he carried and tried to comfort her when she cried. He pulled her

arm up to his lips and teeth and tasted her frightened skin: he couldn't figure out if it tasted sweet or if it tasted sour, and finally decided it was both.

He ate as much of his favorite candy as he could steal, until he was almost sick with it. Almost, but not quite. Sweet and sour. Sour and sweet.

Rhubarb and honey. Sugar and alum.

He liked being the biggest one out on Halloween Street, using just his sweetest smile and his most twisted snarl for a costume. But that didn't mean he wanted to be an adult. Adults didn't know a thing, for all they acted like they knew everything. They didn't know that clover stems were sweet, or that dandelion stems were as sour as can be. They never tasted them like kids did.

Adults had the power, but they were just a few trick or treats away from dying. Sweet and sour. Sour and sweet. The boy didn't want to die, although sometimes he didn't much like living. Limes and strawberries. Hugs and teeth.

He ran up to each house on Halloween Street, knocking on doors and ringing bells. Sometimes the curtains moved, but no one came to the door. Sometimes someone came to the door, but you couldn't see their face.

A little goblin came around the corner, an ugly mask on the beautiful little body. The boy smiled and frowned, took out his knife and went to give the goblin a little kiss.

The goblin reached up its arms to hug the big boy, but the goblin's little fingers were too sharp, and the big boy's skin too thin.

The boy smiled and frowned, and turned upside down.

He lay there until morning came up and his eyelids went down, smelling the fruit trees and tasting his own blood.

Was it Delicious? Or was it Granny Smith? The boy couldn't decide.

## BUTCHER PAPER

Jean had spent weeks arranging the outing. The terminal kids got out all too rarely, although most of them were still ambulatory. Just bureaucratic hospital regs that made no sense. Anxieties over lawsuits. But she'd gotten to the right people and worn them down. And they put her in charge.

The kids were given any materials they wanted so that they might

construct their own costumes. The first few days they'd just stared at the materials — picking up glue and markers and glitter and putting them right back down again, touching the giant roll of butcher's paper again and again as if it were silk — as if these were alien artifacts that they were handling, objects which might have been contaminated with some rare disease.

She wasn't prepared for what the kids finally came up with.

Each kid had wrapped his or her body in the stiff brown butcher's paper. Wide rolls of tape were used to fasten the pieces together securely. When they were all done they looked like a walking line of packages. Packages of meat.

And that was the way they went out on Halloween Street. And that was the way they went out.

## CLOWNS

The only ones that really scared her were the clowns. Clown masks always smiled, but that made it even harder to guess at the faces underneath.

Sometimes you could tell from the eyes inside the holes: they'd be red or dark above the impossible ugly smile. But sometimes you couldn't see the eyes.

Sometimes all you could see were the spaces where the eyes were missing. Sometimes all you could see was the space where the mouth was missing.

She thought it must be terrible pretending to smile all the time. She thought it must be terrible to be a smile.

But the clowns filled the streets during Halloween every year, more and more of them every year, and the most hideous of all the clowns seemed to be on Halloween Street this year. She saw clowns with large scars across their faces and big ball noses chewed by something worse than a rat. She saw clowns with vampire teeth sticking out from their messy red lips and clowns with mouths and ears sewn shut by bright blue shoelaces. There were mad clowns and suicidal clowns, crazed and sick and dead clowns. And half of them didn't carry treat sacks. And half of those were much too large to be children in disguise.

*Laugh, child!* said a voice behind her. She turned and there was the fattest clown she had ever seen, with rolls of brightly painted fat spilling out of his baggy white pants.

*Be happy!* said another voice, and suddenly there was the thinnest clown she had ever seen, his shirt torn away to show the white flesh like tissue covering the narrow rib cage.

*Smile...* said a crawling clown with a head like a snake. *Sing a merry tune...* said a leaping clown with red axes for hands.

And she felt so scared she did begin to laugh, laughing so hard until she peed her pants and then laughing some more. Laughing so hard that when a clown no more than six inches tall and with an orange rat's tail hanging out of the back of his pants handed her a tube of black grease paint she took it, and drew her own smile around her shrieking lips.

So that ever after that she could smile, no matter how she felt inside.

## MASKS OF ME

Ronald went to the door and was surprised to see a little boy standing there wearing a mask that looked just like Ronald's own face.

"Where'd you get that mask of me?" Ronald asked, but the little boy just turned and ran away. Ronald went out on the front porch and yelled as loudly as he could, "WHERE'D YOU GET THAT MASK OF ME?" But the little boy just kept on running, and never looked back.

Ronald jumped off the porch and ran after the little boy. Behind him, he could hear his mother and father calling after him in panic, but Ronald kept running, just knowing that he had to catch that little boy and find out about the mask of his own face.

"I WON'T HURT YOU! I JUST WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THAT MASK OF ME!" he called, but the little boy just kept getting further and further away, like he had leopard legs or something. Leopard legs and Ronald's own face.

He chased that little boy with the mask of himself up Fredericks Lane and down Lincoln Avenue. He spun into Jangle Road so fast he almost fell down. The wind was blowing hard and the trees were moving like they were getting ready to dance and the whole thing made Ronald feel like he was flying, soaring after that little boy wearing his mask of Ronald.

"...where'd you get that mask of me..." Ronald tried to say but the wind caught his words and blew them away so hard he could hardly hear them himself.

"...where'd you...where'd you..." the wind spat back at him.

Then finally the little boy turned onto Halloween Street and Ronald felt pretty good about that because he knew Halloween Street was a dead end. But he wasn't ready for all the kids trick or treating there, hundreds of them of all sizes, and all of them wearing these masks with Ronald's own face.

"Where'd you get those masks of me?" Ronald cried out in confusion.

"Where'd you get that mask of me?" they all chorused back in panic and fatigue.

"...where'd you...where'd you..." the wind gently crooned.

And then there was nothing else to say. All the children with Ronald's face sat down on Halloween Street and said nothing. Ronald wondered if maybe they were all waiting for the real Ronald to stand up, for the real Ronald to make it perfectly clear exactly who was who.

So the real Ronald stood up and tried to take his face off, just to show all the others that it wasn't a mask. And all the other real Ronalds stood up and tried to take their faces off, to finally put an end to the crowded masquerade.

And all of Ronald's faces did come off. And there were the Willies and the Anns and the Bobbies and the Janes. And there was no one named Ronald there at all.

And no one could remember ever knowing any kid with such a strange name.

## PLAY PARTY

Ellen left the party early because she didn't belong.

Freddie left the party early because he didn't belong.

Willa left the party early because she didn't belong.

Johnny left the party early because he didn't belong.

They wandered their separate ways toward Halloween Street, empty and waiting sacks clutched desperately in their hands.

Behind them faded the community sounds, the get-together songs of

corn-husking, apple-paring, rock and roll dancing, bobbing for apples and stealing a kiss.

*Come, all ye young people that's wending your way,  
And sow your wild oats in your youthful day...*

But there would always be a place where the loners could go.

*So choose your partner and be marching along...*

Halloween Street was always open to the Ellens, the Willas, the Freddies and Johnnys.

*For daylight is past, the night's coming on...*

Where the doors to the empty houses would open only to their special knocks.

And close them up safe. And close them up tight.

## JACK

Marsha cut her thumb real bad last year carving pumpkins, so this year her dad said she couldn't carve pumpkins at all. He said she was too careless. She didn't understand how he could remember things that far back — sometimes she had trouble just remembering what happened last week — but he did. And she had made him mad the last couple of days and sometimes that made him remember more. She had let the soup boil over on the stove and she had borrowed her mother's ring and lost it and she had let the baby crawl away when she was supposed to be watching him.

Sometimes it was hard for her to remember things especially when she was excited about something like Halloween. But Dad didn't seem to understand that at all. That's why she'd taken the knife out of the kitchen and hid it in her treat sack. There was a big pumpkin patch behind Halloween Street and she'd find herself one there to carve.

All up and down Halloween Street the jack o' lanterns were wonderful this year. She didn't know any of the people who lived on this street, and she didn't know anyone else who did either, and that made her wonder all the more what kind of people would carve such great pumpkins.

On the pumpkins there were faces with great mustaches and faces with huge noses. Enormous, deep-set eyes and mouths that stretched ear-to-ear. Some of the pumpkins had other vegetables attached — carrots and onions and potatoes and turnips — to make features that stood out on the

pumpkin's head. There were pumpkin cats and pumpkin dogs, bats, walruses, spiders, and fish.

There was every kind of face on those pumpkins a person could imagine: faces Marsha had seen lots of times and faces Marsha had never seen once in her entire life.

But there wasn't a single pumpkin that matched anyone in her head she might have called a "Jack." As far as Marsha was concerned there wasn't a "Jack o' lantern" in the bunch. So she'd just have to make herself one.

She slipped down a well-worn pathway that ran between two dilapidated houses, crept along a waist-high fence whose paint had peeled and furred to the point where it gave her the creeps just to touch it, until finally she stepped out into the pumpkin patch: yards and yards of green foliage studded with the big orange pumpkins.

She couldn't see the ends of the patch — it stretched out as far as she could see on this side of the river. But for all the pumpkins to choose from, finding the right one for "Jack" was easy.

It was a squat, warped-looking thing just beginning to rot. But she could already see Jack's face in the bulgy softness of its sides. She cleared off the dirt from its surface, pulled out the knife, and stuck it in as deep as she could make it go. The patch sighed and shook as she wiggled the knife back and forth. It felt icky, like she was carving up a baby or something.

Finally Jack's face started coming out of all that softness: a wide mouth with teeth as big as knife blades, a nose like a hog's nose, or maybe some other animal that liked to stick its face down in the mud, and two deep deep little eye holes, like the eyeballs had sunk way down so that you couldn't look at them, so that you could never know exactly what old Jack was feeling.

That was the other thing — somehow Marsha just knew that Jack's face was old, as old a face as Marsha had ever seen. So old it was like Jack could have nothing in common with Marsha, or even care.

So that after she'd made Jack, Marsha decided she really didn't like him very much. The fact was, she hated him. So she dropped him on his big ugly face and ran out of there. She ran out of the patch and back down the path that led between the dark houses and out into the shadowy lane that was Halloween Street itself. Then she remembered she had forgotten the kitchen knife.

It wasn't an ordinary knife — it was part of a set her parents got for their wedding and it had a different sort of handle and once her dad found it gone then he would know who had taken it.

Marsha went back up the pathway slowly, but when she reached the pumpkin patch she saw that a man was standing there, right in the middle of the Halloween Street pumpkin patch, just staring at her.

He wore a big black coat and a big black hat and his hands had been swallowed up by big orange gloves.

And Marsha could see that he was standing right where she had dropped Jack. So her parents' kitchen knife had to be someplace near his feet.

"Excuse me, sir?" she said and the man took a step toward her. "Did you see..." And the man took another step. "...a knife?" And the man stepped closer still.

When the man took several more fast steps Marsha turned and ran. She ran back down the path and she ran out in the street but when she turned her head the man was right there.

So she ran to the end of the street and beat on a door there but she could hear the man coming up the steps and so she ran to the edge of the porch and jumped off and ran to the next empty house with a pumpkin on the porch and then the next and then the next but nobody ever answered even though all the jack o' lanterns were lit and she could hear the man behind her with every terrified step.

Finally she was stuck in one corner of a dark yard and there was no place to turn and the man was coming right up to her he was so tall she couldn't see the top of him and he had one orange hand held up high.

"Your knife, I've got your knife, little girl," the man said in a friendly voice and she felt all better again.

Until he took off his hat with that big orange glove of his and his head was that pumpkin she carved, that big old ugly Jack with the knife blade teeth and her parents' kitchen knife was stuck in all the way to the handle right beside his nose but he didn't seem to mind.

## OWLS

All night long the owls gathered in the trees up and down Halloween Street.



All night long they rustled their feathers and stared with their eyes of glass.

All night long they wept while the children played.

For owls know that some days the sacks are empty. For owls know a sack can't be filled with wishes.

And owls know the children eventually go home, lock their doors, and never come out again.

The children hooted and screeched their way from house to house, the tears of the owls glistening on their shoes.

### TREATS

Almost midnight, when the last of the children should have been home, but were not, their bags too full of treats to carry, and Halloween Street full of the sounds of rustling costumes and laughter, candles were seen to light up all over the lane and both sides of the creek.

The children, if they hadn't been so excited by the bizarre and exciting shapes of each other, by the heady scent of colored sugars in their bags, might have been a little frightened by this, but for the moment it seemed like a great deal of fun. The world was full of treats for them, and each new event offered them more. They all laughed out loud.

Some of them cheered.

But then the individual flames began to drift away from their individual candletops, rising swiftly to join one another in the sky above, where they paused as if sad and reluctant before floating up into the dark night.

As quickly as that. As quickly as a hungry child emptying his bag of its bright and shiny, but ultimately unsatisfying, treats.

Only one child cried, but all the others recognized what he felt. For a brief moment they thought of the ends of things, of how alone they were in this dark and treatless night.

One by one the children drifted away to home and their separate dreams, even the youngest among them trying to pretend he was younger still, a baby, some unknowing sprite who might last this night forever.





# FILMS

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## KATHI MAIO

### GETTING BACK TO BASICS

**I**N 1959, a master of twentieth-century horror named Shirley Jackson published a novel called *The Haunting of Hill House*, a book that clearly illustrates the subversive delights of the author's best work. For although Jackson makes full use of one of the most hackneyed formulas of modern suspense, the damsel-in-distress-in-a-spooky-house gothic, she puts her own, very distinctive spin on it.

In a standard modern gothic, a meek, inexperienced woman comes to an austere locale, gets scared, and finds romance. And, in a really sad and twisted way, I guess you could say that this is the fate of Jackson's protagonist, Eleanor Vance.

Nell had spent her entire youth caring for her unhappy and unloving invalid mother. Now, with her

mother dead, she is free. But for what? She has no wealth, no home (except for a cot in her harridan sister's house), and no experience of the outside world. She has been shut away in a sick room for so long that she blinks in the sun. When, out of the blue, Eleanor receives an invitation to take part in psychical research at a brooding Berkshires estate, she leaps at the chance.

Perhaps Eleanor had read some of those formula gothics, too. Because she expects — like Jackson's readers — great things to come from her getaway to the gothic manse. "Journeys end in lovers meeting," is Miss Vance's mantra. But Shirley Jackson is not one to meet expectations. And poor Eleanor finds no brooding yet gallant lifemate at Hill House. Not in the married paranormal researcher, Dr. John Montague, who hopes to document the phenomena of a haunted house. Nor in



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feckless young Luke, likely heir to the "deranged" (as the Professor terms it) mansion. And to add yet another "perverse" element to her story, Jackson even introduces another woman as possible true love for our heroine. Is the worldly Theodora a lesbian? We never find out for sure. But certainly the attentions she showers on the love-starved Eleanor goes beyond simple, friendly acquaintance. So much so that Eleanor resolves to follow Theo home at the end of their experimental work.

When she rejects Eleanor, Theo makes it clear that her new friend will be unwanted in her home. "I've never been wanted anywhere," is Eleanor's placid reply. But that's not strictly true. If none of its human inmates want her for their own, Hill House itself seems quite ardent in its pursuit of Eleanor. Much of the midnight clanging and all of the mysterious messages found in the house are directed at Nell. Is it all an unstable, lonely young woman's delusion? Jackson leaves it to us to decide. Yet it's hard to shake the idea that this "haunted" house has claimed another woman, as a lover might, providing poor, sad Nell with eternal shelter from the human storm.

Not exactly the romantic end-

ing a reader might expect. But that's what makes the story such a compelling one. No wonder that Hollywood soon came calling to requisition it.

In 1963, a screen adaptation of Jackson's novel, called *The Haunting*, was released. Both director Robert Wise and screenwriter Nelson Gidding tried to stay as faithful to the original story as possible. As in the editing of the title, a tightening up (and paring down) of the story does occur. Minor characters are expunged. But a real respect is shown for Jackson's sensibilities.

Shot in black and white, prior to the days of modern computer-generated FX, the film still offers several striking images, including an impressive, pre-"morphing" transformation of a bereft young girl into a sick and sorrowful old woman, right before our eyes. Yet, Wise has little interest in producing elaborate physical manifestations of a haunting. Instead, he tries to capture the sensation of fear. And succeeds in doing so, admirably. We get a few harsh and eerie sounds, and some odd camera angles of objects like doors and turrets. But we never see any monsters or ghostly apparitions—or gore of any kind.

Instead, through the solid acting of Julie Harris, and a touch of skillful voiceover narration, the audience is able to share Eleanor's experience of Hill House. Is this the portrait of a distraught woman sliding into suicidal insanity? Or is this a vulnerable creature falling into the possession of an evil, stone and mortar entity? Again, it's our call. But whatever an individual audience member decides, they will almost certainly be shaken by the viewing.

Nineteen-ninety-nine's *The Haunting* is liable to haunt no one. And if audience members leave the theater shaking, it can only be with derisive laughter.

As directed by Jan DeBont, and written by David Self (with re-shoot doctoring by, they say, Michael Tolkin), this new *Haunting* not only plays fast and loose with Jackson's story, it does so in a way that epitomizes all that is wrong with big budget — this one cost \$80 million — horror films.

DeBont is not a filmmaker known for character-driven or subtle storytelling, of course. This is the man who hurls cows (*Twister*) and cruise ships (*Speed 2*) at a viewer's head, hoping they'll be impressed. And, in his latest outing, he tries the same approach with

things that go bump in the night. It doesn't work. The director's Hill House is a CGI fun house, to be sure, loaded to the rafters with stone griffins that attack and bedframes that seek to impale their inhabitants. But despite all that, none of the showy effects have the power to frighten us. They are too over-the-top and too literal-minded.

The men who made this movie forgot one simple rule of horror: It is what we *don't* know, and what we cannot see that leaves us quaking in our boots.

And to make matters worse, the writers completely reworked Shirley Jackson's original story. (Does the phrase "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" mean nothing to you, my lads?) In this version, Dr. David Marrow (Liam Neeson) is no longer an aboveboard scholar of the supernatural. This guy is a sadist who wants to do an analysis of human fear, but tells his research subjects that he is doing a sleep disorder study. This is not only dishonest, it also makes no sense. If he doesn't think Hill House is possessed of demons, why does he think his subjects will exhibit enough fear to document? And if he *does* think that the ghost of the house's original owner is a monster seeking to destroy all those who enter his domain,

why the heck is he willing to stay there himself?

The other members of the study group are based a little more clearly on the Jackson model. Catherine Zeta-Jones plays trendy, bi-sexual (and proud of it) Theo. Owen Wilson plays the slacker heir, Luke. And Lili Taylor plays awkward, self-sacrificing Eleanor.

A word about Lili Taylor: Along with Parker Posey, she is the best and most prolific "leading lady" of today's American independent cinema. If you don't go to indies, you probably have no idea who she is. But, take my word for it, she is just about as good as it gets. (See *Dogfight*, *Household Saints*, or *I Shot Andy Warhol* for examples of her work.) I have prayed long and hard for Taylor to bring her talents to a wider audience. It's a crying shame that darling Lili's major studio breakthrough had to be in this turkey.

What DeBont does to Lili Taylor is almost as tragic as what the film's author does to the character of Eleanor. No longer is Nell a grieving, emotionally deprived young woman looking for love and a nice home. Now she is some kind of psychic avenger, born to the task of freeing the souls of dead wives and murdered children imprisoned by

Hugh Crain, the demonic builder of the place. Originally, the owner of Hill House was a pathetic puritan who, like most prosperous men of the early nineteenth century, wasn't the warmest father or husband. Self's Crain is Satan incarnate, an early industrialist who seems to have killed his youngest workers on a whim.

As best I could make out the preposterous plot, modern-day Eleanor is the descendent of one of Crain's unhappy wives, and was therefore destined to come to Hill House to beat back the devil Crain. As the loopy tale builds to a crescendo, Crain tries to possess Eleanor, and our virginal heroine (complete with diaphanous white nightie) fights a battle royale with her demonic host. If you can set aside Jackson's superior novel, there is, I admit, a certain campy potential to this plot tangent. But the filmmakers completely squander it.

Forget about their questionable theology. The real issue here is that after Eleanor becomes their exorcist extraordinaire, facing down and banishing a rather flamboyant fiend, the filmmakers kill her off. The original Eleanor had nothing to live for — no love, no home, no prospects. For her, dying and becoming

a member of the ghostly sorority of Hill House was a tragic but somehow apt end to her unhappy life. But Self and DeBont's Nell becomes a Superhero, a virginal avenger who can defeat evil with the power of her voice and her will. That gal has a job to do, and they should have let her live to do it again, and again.

Not that I'd want to turn these guys loose on another story like this. Heaven, and the goddess Eleanor, forbid. In fact, I'd like to think that Hollywood would learn a lesson from this movie. And if the lackluster returns on *The Haunting* don't make the point, perhaps the success of a concurrent ghost story, *The Blair Witch Project*, will bring it home.

*The Blair Witch Project* is a first (general release) feature from a pair of young filmmakers named Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick. And it represents a novel approach to fictional filmmaking. The co-writer/directors devised a scenario and then hired three unknown actors (with improvisational skills) to live it. Filmed during a near twenty-four-hour-a-day, eight-day shoot, by the actors themselves, the mock-documentary is labeled as the found footage of three young filmmakers who went into Maryland woods to record the leg-

end of a local "witch," and never returned.

Through "director" Heather Donahue's video diary, we see the project from the start, as she and her cameraman (Joshua Leonard) and soundman (Michael Williams) set out for the forest not far from Burkittsville, Maryland. They bring with them all the enthusiasm of film buffs who grew up on horror films, and all the skepticism of modern, educated folk who don't really believe that ghosts and demons exist.

From the townies, they collect a few stories of the Blair Witch. These tales of disappearances and murders fuel their interest and make them even more eager to enter the forest lair of this mythic figure. But soon there is discord amongst the trio. Good-natured teasing quickly turns to accusations, recriminations and fear, as the three twentysomethings realize that they are lost in the woods. And dread mounts as they come to believe that they are being taunted and stalked by the witch herself.

There are zero special effects in *Blair Witch Project*. We never see the witch. Nor do we see the direct effects of her violence. We see a few piles of rocks, and odd crosses hanging from bare trees. We hear



rustling and cries in the night. And we watch as three cheerful and confident young people are consumed by terror.

*The Blair Witch Project* developed mega-buzz at Sundance. And with the help of multiple websites, good publicity from its distributor, Artisan (who also handled last year's low-budget sf sensation *Pi*), and a mockumentary on the mockumentary, "The Curse of the Blair Witch," which ran — repeatedly — on the Sci-Fi Channel, the buzz kept building. No film can live up to that kind of cult hype. And this one doesn't...quite. All the shaky camera work gets old after a while. And although it's under an hour and a half in length, *Blair Witch Project* still feels a little long for the story it tells.

Nevertheless, there is no denying the low-tech horror this film is

able to deliver. Shot for less than \$50,000, it is a hundred times the movie Jan DeBont made for \$80 mil. *Blair Witch Project* is a better movie because it knows that a tear running down the face of a character we care about (Heather Donahue) is much more disturbing than a CGI statue that tries to drown a character we *don't* care about (Dr. Marrow) in a fountain of blood. Sanchez and Myrick are also smart enough not to undercut the potency of their tale by attempting to explain the unexplainable. They leave us with a mystery capable of haunting our dreams.

Early on in *Blair Witch Project*, Heather discusses her vision with her crew. Don't go for any "cheesy" effects, she tells them, "the legend is unsettling enough." Somebody, please, take a memo to Hollywood.



*Michael Thomas grew up in Detroit and lives in the suburbs with his wife and daughter. He says that Motown has its own mythology that's every bit as strong as the Arthurian legends; tales of the mighty wizard Henry Ford, the heroic Walter Reuther, and epic events like the Battle of the Overpass impressed him strongly in his youth. His new story, however, is a work of science fiction, not fantasy: it applies quantum mechanics to the city of assembly lines, mixes in real events like the Hunger March, and voilà!*

# The Time Thief

*By Michael Thomas*

**T**HE STRANGER APPEARED  
at the crest of the knoll.  
Mark and his friends, playing tag  
through the carcass of the abandoned

Model T, did not see or hear him approach, but Mark gradually sensed the man's presence the way a disturbing thought lingers at the edge of consciousness before bursting full blown into the mind.

The steering wheel was safe and Mark rested his hands on the wheel while the Mellon twins, their scrawny red-headed bodies looking like waltzing carrots, scampered away from pudgy and flat-footed Joey Hanson. Soot from the blast furnaces coated the rusting car, turning Mark's fingertips black where they touched the wheel. He wiped his hands on his knickers, then with a spidery kind of feeling knew that he was being watched, caught at playing hookey from the eighth grade even before he looked up and saw the man. At first the stranger was just a silhouette on the hill framed by the saw-toothed battlements of the Ford Rouge Plant. Black smoke from the coke ovens momentarily blotted out the sun, transforming the man from silhouette to hawk-faced stranger. As Joey and

the Mellon twins climbed through the car to Mark's side, he pointed at the man and they watched as the stranger slowly descended the hill toward them.

"Service Department?" Joey whispered.

"Must be," Pete Mellon said.

"Hobo," Mark guessed.

"Must be," Paul Mellon said.

The man reached the foot of the hill, stuck his hands on his hips and grinned at the boys. He wore a brown leather aviator's jacket, threadbare and ripped, and a hat with the brim shadowing his forehead. He was thin with deep-set eyes and sunken cheeks, convincing Mark that he was indeed a hobo, probably having just ridden the rails from out west to find work at the Ford Plant.

"Excuse me, boys, but is that the Ford Rouge Plant?" the stranger asked.

"That's Ford's," Mark said.

The Mellon twins stifled laughter over anyone being so dumb as to not know Ford's.

"They hiring?" the man asked.

"Maybe," Joey said. "But they'll only start you at \$6 a day."

"Yeah," Mark said. "My dad started at \$6 a day and he worked his way up to almost \$10 a day doing tool and die and then they fired him. They just hired him back and made him start at \$6 again."

"Least he got hired back," Joey said. "My old man got laid off and hasn't worked for six months."

Mark blushed and studied his shoes; he should have been happy that his father was back to work, but he felt awkward, almost ashamed of the fact around his friends whose fathers were still jobless and broke. The Mellon family took in boarders, Joey's mother cleaned houses to make sure they had food. So Mark should have felt lucky, but actually felt ashamed, a feeling which had become his natural state.

For as long as he could remember his father had swung on a demented pendulum between working overtime six days a week and losing his job. With each swing of the pendulum, Mark's shame grew worse; it always seemed as if his father lost his job because there was something wrong with him or with the family. The first time it happened, men from the Ford

Sociological Department came to inspect the house and the family to make sure they were living decently and were deserving of his father's profit-sharing bonus. No one knew exactly what standards old Henry Ford thought were befitting a bonus, but whatever they were, the men in suits who poked and prodded through the dirty laundry and examined the pantry for liquor bottles found no evidence that Mark's family lived up to their quality control. Not only did his father lose his profit-sharing bonus, he lost his job. Now, the Sociological Department was gone, but in the ten years since, his father had been rehired five times and lost his job four times, always for some reason that implied it was the man's own fault, or the family's fault, and each time Mark's shame grew deeper.

"Sounds like things are tough around here," the stranger said.

"Mister, where you been?" Joey laughed, puckering his pudgy face. "It's hard times. But things is gonna change. There's gonna be a march on the plant and they say thousands of guys is gonna...."

Mark jabbed an elbow into Joey's ribs.

"Ow! What's the big idea?"

"You shouldn't go talking to strangers about things," Mark whispered.

Pete Mellon's eyes formed discs beneath his mop of red hair. "Yeah. He might be a Service Department spy."

"Service Department spy," his brother said.

The stranger chuckled to himself, his lips curling upward, bunching his thin face into a death's head grin. "Has there ever been a march on the plant?"

"Guess not," Mark said.

The man nodded, more to himself than to the boys. "Then this is the right one," he said. "It's 1932." He tipped his hat and said, "Much obliged. You boys have yourself a good day." He started back up the hill, hesitated, turned and tossed a quarter to each boy.

"Geez, thanks, mister," Joey called after him.

Mark fingered his quarter and watched the stranger disappear over the rise of the hill as if the smoke and flames and massive walls of the plant were a dragon that had swallowed the man whole.

Then the man reappeared and beckoned them with a crook of his finger.

"Let's run," Pete Mellon said.

"Run," Paul said.

"I ain't going up there," Joey said.

Drawn for some reason he could not understand, Mark climbed the hill and stared down with the stranger at the plant. It stretched like its own dark city all the way to the Rouge River where freighters docked and skeletal gantries unloaded the ore. Lines of smokestacks carved a fence pattern across the sky, the buildings housing the assembly lines crowded each other like the caves of some race of toiling dwarves, and over all the smoke from the blast furnaces wrapped the plant in a shroud.

The stranger pointed and said, "Is that Miller Road down there?"

"Yep," Mark said.

The stranger nodded. "By the way, do you know...." The man hesitated, then shook his head. "Never mind. It's better if I find him myself."

Mark waited, but the man only went on staring at the craggy summits of the blast furnaces. At last, Mark turned and raced down the hill. It was a warm day for March, but Mark shivered. With a start, he realized he was frightened, not knowing why, only knowing the stranger's appearance was an omen, as unlucky as walking under a ladder.

**T**HE BOYS DEBATED what to do with their quarters, the Mellons wanting to see Scarface and Joey and Mark holding out for parfais at Henderson's Drug Store. At last the parfais won and the boys sat at the counter, eating with long-handled spoons, speculating about the stranger.

"Maybe he's a communist," Pete Mellon said.

"I still think he's Service Department," Joey Hanson said.

"He's just a hobo," Mark said.

As they talked, Mark's conviction about the man weakened. Something about the stranger, something knowing in the sunken eyes made him sure the man was much more than a hobo. But he couldn't believe the man was one of the goons from the Ford Service Department. Goons always wore suits and ties. Still, there was something not quite right about the man. Maybe Joey was right, maybe the guy was a spy trying to find out about the Hunger March.

He sipped melted ice cream from the bottom of the glass with a straw, then smelled aftershave and his mood brightened.

"How's my favorites?" Randy Randolph said. He sat on a swivel stool at the counter, played with one of his ruby rings, straightened his tie, smoothed his greased-back hair. Randy had the look of an eager Doberman pinscher and just about as much fashion sense, but to Mark he was as heroic as Charles Lindbergh. Randy started out life like them, living off the Ford Plant like rats living off a garbage dump, but now Randy dressed better than a politician and had no fear of layoffs or the Service Department. Randy was the lord of numbers; his masters weren't foremen, but the kind of guys you saw in movies, riding the running boards of cars, Tommy guns in hand.

Randy made a quarter appear from behind Mark's ear, then repeated the sleight of hand, pulling a stack of white cards from behind Mark's other ear. Randy fanned himself with the cards and grinned.

"I'll sell twice as many as last week," Mark said.

"I'll beat you any day of the week," Joey said.

The Mellons leaped for the cards.

"Hold up there," Randy said. "There's plenty for everybody."

Mark pocketed his allotment of cards; he would be on Miller Road at shift change, ready to sell the betting cards to plant workers, eager to impress Randy, just as eager to collect his five percent commission. Other runners only made two percent, but Randy took care of his runners, paid better, acted as buddy, confidant and father figure to Mark and his friends.

Randy ordered a chocolate shake, ruffled Mark's hair for no reason, then forced a comb through his own grease-caked hair.

Joey climbed onto the stool next to Randy. "Hey Randy, you gonna be in the march?"

"March?" Randy asked.

"The march on the plant. You know."

Mark sensed they should keep quiet, but this was Randy, after all, and he didn't want to loose his spot as Randy's number one pal. "There's gonna be thousands," Mark said.

"That a fact?" Randy said. "I suppose your dads will be there, right in the front row."

"You bet," Mark said.

Randy shook his head. "Suckers," he said. "It's all a sucker's game. Remember what I told you guys. You don't want to be the ones buying the cards, you want to sell them. Nobody gets rich playing the cards and nobody gets rich working in some factory. You think marching on Ford's is going to make things better? Fat chance. And even if it does, your fathers will just be replacing one master with another. I got this cousin who works in a mine. They got a union. You know what that means? It means they still work in the mines only they got to pay union dues on top of everything else and do what the union bosses say to do. No, the only way to get ahead is with guts. You got to be an entrepreneur."

"A what?" Joey asked.

"You heard the man," Mark said, even though he had no idea what an entrepreneur was.

Randy tapped the tobacco down on a Chesterfield and lit the cigarette. "Go out on your own. Take me, for example. The boss tells me what to do, but he doesn't give a rat's ass about how I do it. As long as they get their cut, I'm a free man. So if I want to pay you guys more, that's fine and dandy. I don't report to nobody. And when I go home, my old lady's got steak on the table. My boy doesn't hold his pants up with rope. He's got more suspenders than you guys got teeth. So wise up. Ford's is for suckers."

"Right," Mark agreed. Randy was always right; his vision of life lingered with Mark, filled him with a luminous sense of life's possibilities, as rich as a stomach full of steak. The alternative was the assembly line, his future as predictable and fixed as engine blocks rumbling along the line in their single-minded ferocity.

"For instance," Randy said, "I can foretell the future. I predict there's more layoffs coming."

"How do you know that?" Joey asked.

"Because that shelf over there is empty. Do you know what used to be on that shelf? Hair dye. All the old guys are busy dying their hair so they look young and maybe fool people into thinking they still got what it takes. Happens every time rumors about layoffs start. Ain't that pathetic? Like I says, only suckers buy the cards."

"Right," Mark said.

"So you guys just stay away from this march. When is it now?"

"Day after tomorrow," Mark said.

"That's right. You told me that already. And what time was it again? Where's it starting?"

"Miller," Joey said. "Nine o'clock sharp, my dad says."

Randy grinned and said, "Right. That's right." He leaned on the counter and stared at the Mellon twins. "Cat got your tongue?"

Peter and Paul shook their red heads, synchronized like clockwork dolls.

"You guys are brain-damaged," Randy said and laughed. Cigarette dangling from his lip, he examined his appearance in the mirror behind the soda fountain, patting down his lacquered hair, using Joey's shirt to wipe the grease from his fingertips. "Well now, I got to be on my way. See you boys tomorrow, right?"

"Right," they all said and watched Randy swagger from the drugstore as if he was leaving the swinging doors of a saloon.

It was time to go home, so they followed Randy into the street. The air had turned the color of dirty snow, the low-hanging clouds erecting a bunker around the sun. Mark and his friends passed the Michigan Arms where plant workers crowded the lobby to find a woman and rent a room by the hour. Pete Mellon suddenly lurched to a halt and threw his arm across his friends.

The stranger turned the corner, at first stared past the boys as if searching for something or someone, then recognized them and grinned.

"All of that," the stranger said, sweeping his arm toward the fields extending behind Henderson's Drug Store, "will be gone within years. A great war will come and your fathers will be building tanks and army trucks instead of cars. Thousands of people will come north to work in the plants and at first they'll live in Quonset huts, but eventually there will be houses and stores and office parks and hospitals...."

The man went on while the boys glanced at each other, made circular motions with their fingers at their temples.

"Ah, mister," Joey Hanson said. "Where you been? The Great War has already been fought. We won."

The stranger blinked at him, for a moment looked lost, then smiled. "Of course," he said. "Only I wasn't talking about that war. This will be another war. And there will be wars beyond that one. I shouldn't tell you



boys this, but I like you. Tell your fathers to buy these fields here. If they do, they'll make more money than you can dream about."

Mark stared at the empty fields, home to old tires, bottles, dead grass and cattails, and decided the man wasn't Service Department, but a plain old madman.

"Now," the stranger said. "If a man around here wanted to get some action, where would he go?"

They all pointed in unison to the Michigan Arms. The stranger watched it for a moment, then said, "No, that's very tempting, but that's not what I meant. What if a guy wanted to wager some money, on numbers, say. Where would he get a card?"

Four hands shot up holding cards.

The stranger laughed. "Well now, you boys certainly are the young businessmen, I'm impressed. But I was thinking about talking to the person who would supply you with such cards. I always believe in going right to the source."

The Mellon twins looked as if they were about to blurt out Randy's name, but Mark leaped in front of them. "We don't know his name."

The man narrowed his eyes at Mark, studied him, finally shrugged his shoulders. "Well, much obliged anyways. You boys have yourself a good day."

Mark watched him walk away, his head swiveling from side to side as if searching for something.

"What's he up to?" the twins asked.

"Maybe he's a G-Man," Mark said.

The boys stared at each other, amazed at the enormity of being hunted by G-Men. As if being chased by something on claws, they bolted for their homes.

That night, Mark's mother made hash and potatoes fried in lard. His father ate two platefuls, his face low over his plate as he spooned the food into his mouth, then straightening up, grease dripping from his lips to stain his shirt. After dinner his father told him to go to his room.

"But the game's on the radio and...."

His father, eyes like lumps of coal, glared at him. Mark began to obey, then lingered in the kitchen doorway. "Dad," he said. "How many guys do you think will be in the march?"

"Don't know," his father said.

"What time do you think we should be there?"

His father looked up at him, uncomprehending, then formed slits with his eyelids. "You aren't going to any march."

Mark was sure he must have misunderstood. "But all the guys...."

"I said no."

"I'll stay right by you. I promise I won't...."

His father snorted. "What makes you think I'm going to march in any fool parade? Besides, they're all reds and I ain't no red."

"Joey Hanson's dad isn't a red. Mr. Mellon isn't. And you helped organize...."

"Well, I changed my mind. I just got my job back and I'm sure as hell not going to do anything to lose it again."

A void formed in Mark, something as dark as the smoke from the Rouge Plant's coke ovens. "All the guys are going," he said lamely.

"And I say shut the hell up!" his father yelled. "You go anywhere near that march and I'll give you something to whine about."

Mark knew enough to keep quiet when his father's voice went high-pitched and his fingers curled into a mallet. Years ago during one of his layoffs, there had been rumors of a foreman beaten up in an alley. Police came and talked to his father, but never charged him with anything. Joey Hanson told Mark his father had heard Mark's father bragging about it in a bar.

Mark retreated to his bedroom where he sprawled on his bed and for a moment choked back tears. He would not let himself cry. Randy Randolph didn't cry. Randy didn't beat up guys in alleys. He didn't care what his father said; he was going to march in the demonstration, shoulder to shoulder with Joey Hanson and the Mellon twins. Maybe Randy was right, maybe they were all suckers, but at least he wasn't chicken like....

He couldn't bring himself to finish the thought, even though the bitterness he felt toward his father lingered like the aftertaste of vomit. His father probably deserved to lose his job time and time again.

Later that night, his father came to his room and sat on the edge of his bed and said, "Look, I'm sorry I yelled at you. You're a good kid. I didn't mean it."

"It's all right," Mark said.

"You just have to understand that a man has to do what he has to do. I put food on the table for you and your mother. I put clothes on your back. I'd rather be marching with my friends, but, well, I just can't. When you grow up you'll understand. Life ain't pretty and sometimes you do things for the best, not because you want to do them."

"Sure, I understand," Mark said.

He felt his father's hand in his for a moment, felt the cold of coins.

"Here's fifty cents," his father said. "Buy yourself something."

"Thanks," Mark said. For a moment he wanted to hug his father, but he remained still on the bed. He was afraid that if he touched his father he would realize how much the man had shrunk.

IN THE MORNING, Mark snuck a bottle of his father's Brylcreem and plastered his hair back before setting off for school. After school, Mark desperately wanted to spend his fifty cents, share his wealth with his friends, but he could not bring himself to explain that his newfound money was a bribe to hide his father's cowardice. He wanted to talk, about what he wasn't quite sure, and at the same time yearned to be alone where he would never have to explain anything to anybody.

He met his friends at the parking lot on Miller Road and peddled his betting cards at shift change. Afterward, Joey wanted to play Indian Ball, but Mark still wanted to be alone so he faked a stomachache. When they were gone he headed for Henderson's and bought the latest *Popular Science* and a fistful of Tootsie Rolls, then sauntered across fields, paying more attention to the ads in the back of the magazine promising wealth for your inventions than to his destination.

He found himself on the banks of the Rouge River. Bluegills once swam beneath the currents, ripe to be picked by anyone with a pole and patience. Now sludge rode the water like mutant plankton and sewage collected along the banks like cancerous puff balls. Mark skimmed a few rocks across the river, then wandered across the field toward the old Model T where he could read his magazine in private.

He climbed into the driver's seat, opened the magazine, then screamed when the hand appeared over the seat back.

He tumbled from the car and whirled. Slowly, the stranger pulled

himself to a sitting position in the back, rubbed his eyes, then grinned at Mark.

"Sorry about that," the man said. "Didn't mean to scare you."

"Jeezus, mister."

"Sorry." He rubbed his eyes again and stared at Mark. "Good magazine?"

"Yeah. You been sleeping here?"

"As good a place as any."

Hobo, Mark decided, definitely hobo.

"Is that what you spent your quarter on?" the man asked.

"Naw. My dad gave me fifty cents. He got his job back."

"So you said. You're lucky." The man opened the car door and sat on the edge of the rear bench seats and pulled his boots on.

"Yeah," Mark said, "as long as we can live good enough to keep it."

The stranger's deep eyes narrowed, his head cocked quizzically. "Live good enough?"

"They're always watching you at the plant. If you don't act right you can get canned. Used to be that guys from the plant came to inspect your house and if you weren't living right then you didn't get your profit sharing, or lost your job. See, Mr. Ford wants people to live right, but I don't think they actually go to your house anymore."

The stranger leaned forward, intense, peering at Mark. "What does living right mean?"

Mark shrugged his shoulders, blushed, felt the need to tell someone and the stranger seemed harmless enough. "Oh, you know, clean house and no fooling around with women and stuff."

"Is that a fact?" the man said. Suddenly he threw his head back and laughed. "So old Henry was into social engineering. I never knew that. He was a man ahead of his time."

The blush on Mark's face deepened, burned into his skin. "It's not funny!"

The stranger stopped laughing. "I wasn't laughing at you," he said. "Actually it's not very funny. Even now there are social engineers coming to power in Europe that will make old Henry Ford look like a rank amateur and bring doom upon the heads of many people, themselves included."

The man smiled gently and said, "Come here. Sit down and show me your magazine."

For some reason he couldn't grasp, Mark ignored his instinctive caution and sat on the edge of the front seat and thumbed through the *Popular Science* while the man rested his chin on the seat back and watched.

"So why did your dad lose his job this time?" the stranger asked.

"He stole time," Mark said.

"He what?"

"They said he was a time thief, that he stole Mr. Ford's time. This guy on the line next to him was a spotter and he kept track of all the time my dad went to the bathroom and he turned my dad in. They said he went to the bathroom too much and that was stealing Mr. Ford's time so they fired him."

The man shook his head. "So Mr. Ford thinks he can even own time, does he?"

"Guess so," Mark said and suddenly needed to change the subject. "Look at this," Mark said. "Someday there's going to be spaceships and people living on the moon. See, this article tells how people will wear these big boots with magnets on the bottoms so they can move around in spaceships where there's no gravity."

"Yes," the man said. "People will live on the moon one day. And Mars. I'm sure you're right."

"They had this neat story in *Astounding Science Fiction* about how these guys went to Mars and they dug up this canal and they found these Martians living underneath that had four arms and they were just waiting for someone to come along so they could steal their spaceship and invade Earth."

In a far-off, distracted voice, the man said, "That sounds like quite a story. You like stories? Would you like me to tell you one?"

"Sure," Mark said.

The stranger gazed at the plant beyond the hill, at the smoke turning the clouds the color of bruised skin, finally said, "Once upon a time, there was a man who died, was murdered actually, and that had a terrible effect on his family because they always depended on him to earn money and put food on the table. The mother had no way of supporting her son except

taking in laundry and cleaning houses because women weren't — aren't trained to do much more. They fell into poverty, but the son managed to help out by running numbers for some local hoods. Pretty soon he started making contacts, as they say in the business, friends who knew the right people to talk to if some guy wanted to make some quick money. And all the time this kid had a burning hate inside of him because of what had happened to his father. All he really wanted was to get back at everybody and everything.

"Then a great war came and all the young men, including the son, had to go off and fight in the war. Well, this son was a pretty smart guy and while everybody else in the army was busy fighting the war, he got an idea on how to make some money off of it. See, wars aren't the way you see them in movies. Guys go into battle and they're so scared they even piss in their pants. That's not bad, you know. It's just the way it is. Being scared doesn't make you any less heroic. In fact you wouldn't be so heroic if you didn't have that fear to conquer. But still, if there was some way you could take the edge off that fear like taking a drink of whiskey, then so much the better. Well this man, boy really since he was only eighteen, knew about something even better than whiskey to help drive a man's fear away, a drug that would make everything in the world seem right. His old contacts from the streets supplied him and he sold it to his army pals and by the end of the war he was a very rich man.

"After the war the man came back to this country and he used his money and his smarts and his old buddies to build up a business, a crime business, doing all kinds of things I wouldn't want a young guy like yourself to hear about. Let's just say he became very rich and very powerful and his sons carried on the business and their sons and the sons of the next generation."

The stranger paused, looked even more far away, as insubstantial as the silence between seconds. At last he shook himself and continued. "All of this took many years, of course, and during this time the world changed drastically. Men did indeed walk on the moon and on Mars and sent probes into deep space. Back on Earth other scientists explored inner space, the worlds deep within your cells. They knew that everything we are is written in a code within our cells. Bit by bit they began to decipher that code and with the keys to human life they created miracles. They could

alter the way a person would be while that person was still an embryo in the womb. They could tell who would get sick from which diseases by studying the cells in a person's parents. They could make people super intelligent, handsome, anything they wanted. They could be gods.

"The problem was that all this magic took money. If you had enough money you could engineer your children any way you wanted, engineer your own cells to stave off disease. If you didn't have enough money you were shit out of luck. So the wealthy and the powerful became more wealthy and more powerful while the poor grew poorer and more envious with each new discovery. Before long there were riots and more wars. Soon the powerful took the next logical step. Since they possessed the power to alter human beings, they could engineer the whole human race, take control of evolution itself."

"Ah, mister, I don't think I understand," Mark said.

The stranger smiled. "You don't have to."

"But what about the crime guys?"

"Be patient. I'm getting there. Anyways, the people with the power took charge and they decided what traits were valuable and which ones were not. They blamed the violence on the poor and their genes, used that as an excuse to withhold the technology of genetic engineering from them, said they were acting in the best interests of the human race, weeding out the defective, the immoral, the stupid. Of course the funny thing was that the right genes just happened to be the ones that the most powerful and wealthy people had."

Mark was still having trouble following the story. "What about the crime guys?" he asked again.

"Well, by now the great grandson of our hero was the head of the family business and he had inherited his family's gift for knowing how to make a buck. Just as his ancestor had made a fortune off of a bad situation, he could do the same. So he gave the poor what they wanted. He started a black market in genetic engineering and sold intelligence and health and good looks just the way some people sold liquor during prohibition or some people run numbers right now. Only it got out of hand, because they could never be sure they were doing it right, not cutting corners, not ripping people off. Terrible things happened. Children mutated or were born dead. The worst was a new disease that made the old devastating diseases look

like the common cold. It was a plague and millions of people died from it. And that only made things worse and there were more riots, more death."

The man paused and went on staring at the jagged teeth of the factory and the black haze. Mark thought the man would continue, but there was only silence. Finally he asked, "How did it end?"

The man roused himself from his trance and shrugged his shoulders. "It hasn't ended yet. Sanity did return to the human race, democracy and all that. People did learn to be more humane when they finally realized that the real message of human evolution is that altruism is self-serving. What affects one member of the group affects all members eventually. But it all came too late for our hero because the crime lord's beautiful wife died from one of the diseases his illegal business had mistakenly created. In his sorrow he came to hate himself and everything his family stood for and he began to wonder what would happen if his ancestor, the first one to be murdered, had lived. Would everything have been different? Because, you see, the scientists had by then gotten very smart, so smart they even managed time travel."

"H.G. Wells!" Mark yelled, finally understanding something, happy he could contribute to the story.

"Yeah," the man said, "just like H.G. Wells. Only that was a story and this was real. They learned about things called paradoxes and path determinants. Let's say this man went back in time and stopped his ancestor from being killed. Maybe that would alter history so much that the man would never be born. How could someone who was never born go back in time and kill his ancestor?"

Mark shrugged his shoulders; he wasn't even sure about the cell stuff.

"So the man realized he could not change the past. But what if you wanted to go back in time not to change it, but to simply watch it, live through it, actually experience the events that were part of your story and led to what you had become? Maybe, just maybe, if you could experience all those major events and all the different people involved, then you could finally understand it all and get those twisted parts of you out of your system and maybe, just maybe, find peace. Have you ever been scared, really scared?"

"Yes."



"I'll bet you told somebody about it. And then someone else, over and over again until it finally wasn't so scary. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Well this was the same way. This man had to go back and relive not just his own life, but the crucial moments in his whole family's past so that finally he could be free and find out who he was."

Again the man lapsed into silence.

"Is that it?" Mark asked.

"Yes," the man said.

Mark liked the story about the Martians much better. By now the light had dwindled and the air had grown cool, the factory walls only dim crags in the gray light.

"I have to get home," Mark said.

"Sure," the man said. "You'd better run along home."

As Mark climbed from the car, he asked, "You gonna get a job at Ford's?"

"I don't think so," the man said. He reached into his aviator's jacket and withdrew a black box the size of a bar of soap. "Actually I'm going to record the march on the plant."

Mark wasn't sure what the stranger meant. "You mean take pictures?"

"In a way, yes. This is a kind of camera. Very advanced."

"I guess so," Mark said. Suddenly he grinned. "You mean like the ones in *Life*? Wow, maybe me and my friends will be famous."

The man flinched as if Mark had spit at him. "What do you mean?"

"Take our pictures in the march and sell it to *Life*."

"You're not going to be part of this march, are you?"

"Sure. Everybody is. Me and Joey and Pete and Paul will be right there...." Mark hesitated, finally lied, "Marching with our dads."

Slowly the man unfurled himself from the car and walked to Mark. "Don't do that," he said.

"Are you crazy?"

"It might be — dangerous," the man said. He put a hand on Mark's shoulder. Mark yanked away from the man's touch.

"I got to go home now."

"Wait," the man said, suddenly wild-eyed and grasping for him.  
"What's your name?"

Mark dodged the madman.

"Please tell me your name!"

Mark ignored him, raced up the hill, running from something, not knowing what, hearing the man call, "Don't go near Miller Road when they march. Understand?"

Mark hopped a wooden fence and raced the alleys, convinced the man was following him, finally slowed when he knew he was alone.

The man was crazy, his story even crazier, stupid stuff adults like to tell kids and scare them. Still, the man had told his story as if he had read it from a newspaper. It was like hearing a good ghost story; even when you know it's not true you still believe in some deep closet of your mind. Why had the man said the march would be dangerous? Would something happen at the march tomorrow? Would someone die and doom his kid and ultimately much of the world? Crazy talk, Mark decided.

He walked back to Henderson's Drug Store, needing to be with someone, needing an adult like Randy Randolph. He would have liked to talk to his father, but he thought Randy was more of a man. Randy would know. He ran a comb through his newly greased-back hair and used his remaining quarter to order a chocolate soda and buy the latest copy of the *Katzenjammer Kids*.

Near six o'clock, Randy swaggered in, spun himself around on a counter stool, patted down a cowlick and winked at Mark. "Good hunting?" Randy said.

Mark handed him five dollars.

"That's it?" Randy said.

Mark shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't feel good."

Randy slapped him on the back. "Hey, happens to the best of us."

"I'll do better tomorrow."

Randy went on grinning, but his expression faltered, his jaw tensed from the effort of maintaining the smile. "Why don't you skip tomorrow."

"No, really, I feel good now."

"Right, right, I know that. It's just maybe you'd better skip tomorrow. You know, the march and all. Nobody's gonna buy cards anyways with all the commotion going on."

"Really, it's...."

"Just stay away," Randy said. "Tell your friends to take the day off."

Fear sent cobwebs through Mark's nerves. For the second time he had been warned away from the march. "Randy?" he asked. "What's going to happen tomorrow?"

Randy stared through the plate-glass window. "Happen? Nothing's going to happen. Bunch of guys will make a big noise, then go home. That's all."

Mark shook his head. "Something's going to happen," he said. "I know it. You don't think the police or the plant guys will start anything, do you?"

"Course not. Don't worry. Now you scram. I have to get home. The little woman's got meatloaf waiting and she don't let the kid eat until I'm there."

Randy hopped from the stool, made for the door, then hesitated when Mark grabbed his sleeve. "Joey's dad will be there. Other guys and their dads. Something's going to happen and I don't want them to get hurt."

"I told you...."

"But maybe you don't know. Maybe things will just go crazy. I think I'd better warn...."

Randy yanked his arm away from Mark, knelt and grabbed his shoulders. "You aren't saying nothing to no one. The cops and the plant goons aren't going to do anything."

"How do you know?" Mark asked, then, with a terrible certainty like the news of a death in the family, he whispered, "What do you know?"

"I just know, that's all. You go home and keep your mouth shut. Understand?"

Mark nodded his head and watched Randy hurry from the drug store. He told, Mark thought. He pumped us for information and then he sold it to the cops and to the plant. They know exactly where the marchers will be and when. They would be waiting for the men.

The stranger's story came back to him like a memory of the future. The stranger knew people would die. For a moment it seemed to Mark that the drug store vanished, everything vanished, and he was alone and stranded and, worse of all, betrayed. Betrayed by Randy, by his father's

cowardice, by life itself. Only suckers buy the cards. He had bought the cards.

That night, as his father and mother listened to the radio, Mark lay in his bed, face in his pillow, first numb as death, then feeling as if he needed to scream. What if everything the stranger had said was true? Who would die? Whose ancestor would leave a legacy of doom? He knew he had to warn someone, at least Joey and the twins, tell them not to let their fathers march. But what good would that do? If the stranger was right about the march, then he was right about the future. He had said you can't change the future. So warning them was pointless. Whatever was about to happen would happen no matter what Mark did.

Late that night, when the house was dark and quiet, when all he could hear was the pulse of blood at his temples, Mark knew that he was no longer the same, that a glimpse of an awful and terrifying truth had opened up before him, a vision of life that had at its core essentially nothing. Future and present and past all curved in on themselves to form one implacable, pointless and unchangeable assembly line.

He slept and dreamt of guns roaring, then awoke and the blast of the guns became a pounding on glass.

Beyond his window, Joey Hanson grinned at him, the Mellon twins danced with excitement.

"It's starting," Joey called. "Come on."

"Come on," the twins echoed.

Mark scrambled into his overalls and flannel shirt, bolted into the kitchen. The house was silent, his father, now on the afternoon shift, probably asleep and snoring. For a moment he yearned to wake the man up, tell him everything, but instead hurried into the yard. There was no point in telling him anything. Even if you could change the future, his father was not the man to change anything.

Mark ran through Johnson's Junk Yard, cut across fields, scrambled through an alley, reemerged into the streets in time to see the front of the demonstration reach Vernor at the boundary between Detroit and Dearborn. The sight took his breath away.

They had talked about thousands, a big number that no one took seriously, but there they were, an army of the unemployed, the poor, the starving, the curious, the troublemakers, the communists, the fledgling

union organizers, men, women and children, jammed into the street, their pace slowed to a crawl by the sheer weight and press of their humanity. The line stretched seemingly to the horizon as if it started in the cold March sky itself, pouring not from the city, but from the low-hanging charcoal clouds and surging through a valley formed by the storefronts on either side. Red banners rippled in the wind, clenched fists formed exclamation points in the air.

Along the sidewalks and in the side streets, Detroit police steadied their horses or patrolled the crowd on foot, content to watch and wait.

But no one worried about the Detroit police. Just beyond the front line of the march was Dearborn, the company town, where, Mark guessed, the Dearborn police waited. If the marchers made it past that gauntlet, then there were still the Service Department goons waiting at the plant.

Mark struggled through the crowd of curious onlookers and intersected the head of the march. Joey Hanson was there, as Mark knew he would be, walking next to his father, and the twins behind their red-haired father. Joey caught sight of him and waved him over, pushed against his father's leg to make room for Mark.

Now he was in the march, walking toward the plant, trying not to look at the police lining the sidewalks and their blue steel revolvers.

Someone was going to die.

"Where's your old man?" Joey said.

Mark looked past him, yanked on Mr. Hanson's leg. He had to tell someone. "We'd better stop," he said. "Please."

Mr. Hanson peered down at him. "Why's that?"

"They know everything. They're waiting. There's gonna be trouble."

"How do you know that?"

"Someone's going to die."

"Nobody's going to die."

"Yes they are, please...."

Like a guillotine, the sound of someone calling his name stopped him cold. Lumbering toward them, red faced and breathless, was his father.

No, no, no, go away, go away....

His father trudged toward them, glared down at him, fists clenched, voice high pitched and hysterical. "I told you not to come here. I told you!" He grabbed Mark's arm. "Come home right now."

For a moment, Mark yielded, let his father take him toward safety.

Pushed on by the crowd, they reached the city limits of Dearborn. "Christ," Mr. Hanson snapped.

They faced a wall of police, blocking Miller Road, rifles at the ready. Mark stared, amazed at the rifles, cold steel lethal things, not like the BB gun the Mellon Twins owned. Dread, just as cold as the rifles, burrowed into Mark's gut.

A metallic voice came at them, half garbled by a megaphone, telling them to turn back, telling them it was unlawful.

Men in the front row yelled, "Keep going. We're not breaking any laws."

The metal voice shouted that they had no permit.

"Screw the permit," men yelled back.

Mr. Hanson said, "You boys move back so you're not in the front row."

With shock, Mark realized his father wasn't dragging him home, but was being shoved forward by the crowd.

Mark pulled at him. "We've got to go, we've got to go now, please!"

His father glared ahead at the line of police. "Bastards," he said. Mark saw his father glance at Mr. Hanson, saw his father's jaw set with anger, knew in that moment that his father had changed his mind, that he could not leave his friends in the face of danger.

"No, no, we have to go home now!" Mark pleaded.

A concussion slammed into him, sent him stumbling backward. He lost his grip on his father's hand. Something whizzed over their heads. More concussions, then canisters exploded around them. Within seconds the marchers and the street and the police vanished within a fog as thick as the smoke from the blast furnaces.

Then Mark thought he was dying. His eyes stung as if someone had poured alcohol into them, a fist crushed his chest. He fought to stay on his feet. Bodies crashed into him. People screamed and bolted in their blind panic. Mark knew if he fell he would be trampled.

Blind, he lurched forward, finally grasped brick with his fingers. When he opened his eyes, he was out of the cloud, supporting himself on a building wall. Through his tears he saw people staggering through the cloud, running and falling in their blind panic. More tear gas canisters

exploded on the street. The demonstration, a few seconds ago seeming as large and as immovable as a mountain, shattered into a myriad of groups all bolting in different directions.

Please let this be it, Mark thought.

Marchers ran past him, swearing, rubbing furiously at their eyes, headed for the alleys and open fields.

Mark realized everyone was still headed for the plant, only they were hopping fences and charging down side streets and cutting across open fields in so many groups that the police had no chance to stop them.

Desperately he looked for his father, Mr. Hanson, anyone familiar, but saw only angry, red, unknown faces blurring through the tears that would not cease.

For the first time Mark wondered if his father was about to die and he was the one foretold by the stranger. He gagged, his head swam. Then he ran.

Mark followed the mob along the nearest alley. In the streets, the police scrambled to head them off. Hoofs galloped along asphalt, sirens blared. Tear gas canisters shattered the windows of a dry goods store.

Mark's tears finally dried, leaving grime coated across his face. His arms pumping like pistons, he bolted ahead of the marchers, turned into Miller Road, almost ran headlong into a line of fire trucks blocking the street and the entrance to the plant.

"Shit," someone yelled.

Only the trucks had been deployed to block the street, no one guessing that the demonstrators would come from all sides.

Everywhere in Miller Road people were running through the spray of water as hard as cannon balls from the fire hoses. Those closest to the fire trucks were upended and sent crashing to the street, but from the fields and alleys to the sides, beyond the reach of the hoses, the marchers swarmed and overran the trucks. Firefighters toppled from their trucks as the fragmented mob now reunited into a river surging down Miller Road toward the Ford Plant.

To one side of Miller Road was the parking lot and to the other was the fortress-like plant. An overpass spanned Miller Road from the lot to the plant like a drawbridge spanning a moat. As Mark ran he saw the figures in suits high on the overpass waiting with more hoses. Torrents flowed from the heights in the cold air. There was no choice. The

demonstrators charged through the manmade waterfall, the freezing water hitting them like fists.

Some turned back, most ran on.

Mark instinctively held his breath as he crashed through the torrent. The cold convulsed him with a massive spasm, threatened to knock him out, but somehow he managed to stay conscious and ran until he was clear of the overpass.

By the time he reached the plant gates there were too many people jammed up against the fence for Mark to get close. He heard people shouting, managed to get a glimpse of a short man in a suit charging out of the gate and screaming at one of the marchers.

Mark desperately searched for his father, screamed his name, his voice drowned out by other shouts and screams.

Then he saw the stranger at the fringe of the mob, holding up his black box. Mark elbowed his way through the crowd toward him. Maybe the stranger could explain it to him. Maybe the stranger could make it all right.

As Mark inched his way forward, the man caught a glimpse of him. The man screamed at him, waved him away. As Mark tried to get closer, the man lowered the box and started toward Mark.

"Who is it?" Mark screamed, but his words were lost in the chaos. "Is it me? Is it my dad?"

A flurry of movement at the gate caught Mark's eye. A chunk of asphalt sailed from the crowd, graceful as a dove as it arced through the air, then hurtling downward, gaining frenzied speed, crashing into the plant man's head. The little man screamed, hands flying to his face, crimson seeping through his fingers. He lurched forward, grabbed the marcher for support, then, in each other's arms like lovers, they both toppled to the ground. The marcher staggered to his feet, only, as he stood, his back suddenly arched and his mouth opened in a soundless scream.

Like an echo of the scream, Mark heard the shots: machine guns. Bullets screamed past the mob's head, ricocheted against the fence, the roar of the guns finally drowned out by the screaming people. Bodies crashed into Mark, sending him sprawling as people bolted. There was no hope of fighting his way to his feet, so Mark curled up and threw his arms over his head and waited out the stampede, repeating no, no, no to himself.



When he dared to open his eyes he saw a body, dead eyes watching him, shattered mouth still open to scream. There were others.

Mark climbed to his feet and stared around him, dazed, too shocked to think of much. Abstractly he counted four bodies. Other marchers, wounded and dazed, lay in the street, their limbs twisted into rag doll shapes. Everywhere people bolted for safety. Sirens wailed a banshee's scream.

And then he saw his father, standing, staring about him, looking dazed and sickened. Mark ran to him, almost knocked the man over as he threw his arms around him.

"Thank God," his father said and held him.

It was all right, it was....

And then it wasn't all right.

Men stood around them, Mr. Hanson and Mr. Mellon and others, furious, shouting. One man held a lead pipe, another held a coil of rope.

Mr. Hanson knelt before Mark and grabbed his arm. "How did you know?" he yelled. "You knew something was going to happen. Who told them?"

Mark's father pushed Mr. Hanson aside. "Leave him alone."

"He knew. He tried to warn us. There are dead and dying all around us! We'll find the son of a bitch who told them and we'll kill the bastard!"

Mark looked up at the men, then looked past them. The stranger was with them, holding up his black box as if it were a camera, eyes wide, expectant, waiting.

Mark knew, saw the future as clearly as the dead bodies in Miller Road. It all made sense. Randy Randolph was about to die. Mark would tell the angry betrayed men and they would go after Randy and Randy's son would grow up to exact his terrible revenge on the world. And from the look on his face, Mark knew his father's rage would lead the mob.

This was Mark's part to play. He was about to tell them Randy had brought this down on their heads. He had no choice. He had to betray Randy just as Randy had betrayed him. The script had already been written.

His father knelt and looked him in the face. "Do you know something?" the man asked.

Mark looked his father in the eye and said, "No."

"How did you know?" Mr. Hanson said.

"I had this bad dream," Mark said.

Fear much larger than fear of the men or fear of the violence swept through Mark; it was fear of the universe, as if his lie went against the fabric of time itself.

Suddenly, he didn't care.

His father said, "He doesn't know anything. He's just scared. It could have been any one of their spies."

The mob seemed to deflate, their rage now impotent. With no one to take revenge on, they turned away and began to help the wounded.

Mark stared after them; people still raced back and forth, helping the wounded, firefighters and police restoring order and protecting the plant. Men in suits ran through the crowd, some snatching away cameras from reporters, others taking pictures of the demonstration's leaders. He saw one man kneel and hold up his cumbersome 4x5 camera and take a shot of his father stooping to help a fallen man. That picture would be analyzed and Mark's father would again lose his job. Detached, Mark watched the scene play out as if it were a news reel; he seemed to inhabit a different world.

For a moment, he struggled to identify something, as if he had forgotten a very important fact, but sensed its presence the way a disturbing thought lingers at the edge of consciousness before bursting full blown into the mind.

Then the memory came of a man in an aviator's jacket telling him odd stories about travel in time and warning him of the doom that now came true before the gates to the plant.

He wasn't sure if it was a memory of a man or a dream, then he was positive the stranger existed, only now he was part of Mark's past and the past, as always, no longer existed, just as Mark was now part of the stranger's past. But the stranger had come from the future to record the past. Mark changed the man's past and thus there was no reason in the future for the stranger to return to the Ford Rouge Plant in the year 1932 and so he had not come from the future, only he had come from the future, a future that was no longer Mark's future, but the future in a world that had suddenly careened at an angle away from Mark's world.

With a kind of demented clarity, Mark saw himself in some other universe betraying Randy Randolph even as he knew for sure that he had not betrayed Randy Randolph, except that his memory of the stranger

proved that he had done both simultaneously.

He knew this was true even as he could not understand how it could be true. At first he thought he should be afraid, but the fear never came. Instead he felt a jazz band of giddiness erupt into full swing in his head. If this is what the universe is like then anything is possible.

For the first time in years, Mark did not feel ashamed.

He ran through the carnage on Miller Road, trying not to laugh out loud, to help his father with the wounded and to tell him that if he was smart he'd buy some of those empty fields over by Henderson's Drug Store because one day they'd be worth a fortune when the future came. †

## COMING ATTRACTIONS

REMEMBER WHEN the year 2000 was synonymous with "the future"? How long do you think it will be before you start to feel nostalgic for the Twentieth Century?

With our lineup of coming stories, we aim to make you think "the future" is very bright indeed. Our January issue will feature a new one by Amy Sterling Casil, "Chromosome Circus," set in the same world as her debut, "Jonny Punkinhead" from 1996. (That story was in the issue with the stunning Kent Bash "Auschwitz Clown" cover, if you happen to recall it; we'll also have a Kent Bash painting on the cover next month.) This sf story again considers the fate of those who suffer from the "freak" virus, in particular, a young boy with fur and the people who take him in.

Also scheduled for our 1/2K issue is a lush novelet by Dale Bailey set in the South, "The Anencephalic Fields." To say too much about it would be a mistake, as would be missing it. We also expect to have on hand a little Christmas tale from S. N. Dyer, and possibly a bit of New Year's humor from an unexpected source.

Further down the road, we'll have: Albert Cowdrey's first big foray into the realm of science fiction with his novella "Crux," an ingenious tale from Jeffrey Ford of an apprentice writer, more great adventures from R. Garcia y Robertson, and a terrific mix of stories from old hands and new, including Esther Friesner, Rick Heller, Tanith Lee, Yoon Ha Lee, M. John Harrison, Michael Shea, Ellen Steiber, and N. Lee Wood. Look out future, here we come!



# SCIENCE

PAUL DOHERTY & PAT MURPHY

## BICYCLING AT THE SPEED OF LIGHT

**U**NDER the right conditions, Paul Doherty (physicist, rock climber, and coauthor of this column) can bicycle at near-light speed.

Incredible, you say? Being a science fiction reader, you probably know that light crosses the vacuum of space at 300 million meters or 186,000 miles per second. You probably also know that Einstein's theory of special relativity indicates that the speed of light in a vacuum is a constant — light always travels at 186,000 miles per second. (As the favorite T-shirt of one Exploratorium staffer says: "186,000 miles per second: Not just a good idea. It's the law!")

So, as a knowledgeable science fiction reader you ask a sensible question: If Paul can pedal at near-light speed, why hasn't he won every bicycle race around? Well, if you reread our first sentence, you'll note that we mentioned that our

statement was true only "under the right conditions." You see, under very specific conditions, Dr. Lene Hau, a researcher at the Rowland Institute, recently managed to slow light down to a speed of 17 meters per second, which is slightly faster than Paul can bicycle on the level.

What does Einstein have to say about that? And what does all this have to do with science fiction? We'll get to that soon. First, we need to consider the nature of light, and discuss the speed of light. Then we'll tell you how Dr. Hau managed to slow light down to Paul's bicycling speed and connect all this to Bob Shaw's classic story "Light of Other Days."

### MAKE YOUR OWN ELECTROMAGNETIC WAVE

Light is tricky stuff. Back in the 1870s, the equations of Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell

indicated that light is an electromagnetic wave. (At least, that's one way to look at light. We'll save quantum mechanics for another column. In this one, we'll just talk about light as a wave.)

Back when Maxwell was working on his wave equations, physicists figured that light traveled through aether, an undetectable substance that permeated all matter and space. Pat admits a certain fondness for the theory of aether. It seems like the physicists' equivalent of ghosts. You can't see them, but you know that they are there. Paul describes the theory this way: Physicists knew that sound waves traveled faster through stiffer material. Light was so fast that they figured the aether had to be really stiff — yet this aether which was everywhere didn't seem to exert any drag forces on planets as they moved about in their orbits.

In the nineteenth century, physicists assumed that if light traveled as a wave, it had to be a wave in something. Later experiments by Michelson and Morley contradicted the predictions of the aether theory and it was abandoned. But that still left the problem: What exactly is light a wave in?

Before we tackle that question, here's an experiment that will help

you get a feel for the nature of light. All you need are four pieces of Scotch Magic Tape about as long as your fist is wide and a table or desk. (Since some tables can be marred by having tape stuck to them, we suggest you use a battered old one, like the desks at the Exploratorium, rather than your Aunt Minnie's favorite antique.) Stick two pieces of tape to the table, side by side. Stick two more pieces on top of them. Yank both top pieces off the bottom pieces.

Bring the two pieces of tape close together, and they'll repel each other, moving apart as you try to bring them together. Even though there is nothing connecting the two pieces of tape, they exert a force on each other at a distance. Magic? Nope, it's an electric force acting over a distance.

Tape, like most things, is made up of positively charged protons and negatively charged electrons (along with some neutrons). The tape starts out electrically neutral, with equal numbers of positive and negative charges. When you pull one piece of tape off another, each piece of tape gains or loses some charged particles and gains an electrical charge. Since you peeled both pieces of tape off the same surface, they have the same charge — either

positive or negative, it doesn't really matter. Since similar, or, as physicists say, like charges repel each other, one piece of tape repels the other.

You can think of the interaction between the two pieces of tape in two parts: The charge on one tape creates an electric field which in turn exerts forces on the other tape. The electric field can cross empty space.

What does all this have to do with light? Well, when you wiggle one piece of tape, you're changing the electric field in the space surrounding that tape. The side-to-side changes in the electric field propagate from one tape to the other as a wave traveling at the speed of light. A wave in an electric field creates an accompanying wave in a magnetic field. The combination of changing electric and magnetic fields is called an electromagnetic wave. When you wiggle the tape, you make a wave that travels to the other tape and makes it wiggle. The electromagnetic wave you are creating by wiggling your tapes is an ELF. (No, not that kind of elf. This is a science column, after all.) ELF stands for Extremely Low Frequency radio wave.

Light is also an electromagnetic wave. To understand light, you need

to remember that it starts with a moving electric charge. When you squint because sunlight gets in your eyes, you are responding to an electromagnetic wave that was created when an electric charge in the surface of the sun accelerated. That wave traveled 93 million miles across the vacuum of space to reach your eye 8.3 minutes later. The light made electrons in chemicals that are in the rods and cones in your eye's retina wiggle—and that made you see light.

The electromagnetic wave that you make by moving your charged tape also has to travel. It may seem to you like the second tape moves the instant you move the first one, but there is a time delay. Since the wave propagates at the speed of light, it's a mighty short delay. The speed of light is one foot per nanosecond, so if the tapes were a foot apart, the delay would be a nanosecond, a billionth of a second.

The speed of light in a vacuum was first measured by Ole Roemer in 1676. While studying eclipses of the moons of Jupiter, Roemer noticed that the eclipses were seen 8 minutes earlier than average when the Earth was on the side of its orbit nearest Jupiter. When the Earth was on the far side of its orbit, eclipses were 8 minutes later than average.

This disparity could be explained by assuming that light took 16 minutes to cross the diameter of the Earth's orbit. Knowing the diameter of the Earth's orbit gave Roemer the speed of light: in modern units, 300 million meters per second or 186,000 miles per second.

## SLOWING LIGHT DOWN

That's how fast light travels in a vacuum. But what happens when light shines through something clear, like water or glass? In 1862 Jean Foucault measured the speed of light in glass and found out that it was slower than in vacuum. Light travels about  $2/3$  as fast through glass as it does through a vacuum.

When a light beam passes from one medium into another (from air into glass or glass into air) and slows down, it also bends. Light of different frequencies bends by different amounts, which is why prisms and raindrops separate white light into its component frequencies or colors. We're not going to dwell on the colorful aspects of bending light. For that, check out our column "Watch the Skies" back in December, 1997. If you don't believe that light actually bends at a boundary, check out the experiment on page

104. Here, we're going to talk about why light slows down, rather than why it bends.

Here is a model of how light slows in a material. Step back to 1900 when Maxwell's equations were the last word on what light was, and when physicists knew that atoms contained electrons. Maxwell pictured light as a wave and he knew what light was a wave in. It was a wave in the electric field. (It is also a wave in the magnetic field, but we can ignore that here.)

Electric fields exert forces on electric charges. So when an electric field wave passes by an atom, it exerts forces on the electrons in each atom. Now, the electrons in glass are bound to their atoms. Yet they accelerate up and down under the electric forces from the passing light. Because they are bound to their atoms, these electrons lag a bit behind the electric field wave's ups and downs.

The moving electrons remove some energy from the light. The oscillating electrons then re-emit the light. But the re-emission is slightly delayed. After the light has gone far enough into the glass, almost all of the energy of the original light had been absorbed and re-emitted many times. The net effect of these continuous delays is

the slowing of the light wave as it moves through the material.

Each atom has its own characteristic delay time. Light travels at a different speed through air, through different kinds of glass, through water. In between the atoms of all these materials, light travels at the same speed that it travels through a vacuum. But all those delays mean that its net travel time is longer.

## SLOWING LIGHT WAY DOWN

To slow light down to the speed of a bicycling physicist, Dr. Lene Hau worked with light of a specific frequency. Drive around almost any big city at night and you will see yellow street lights. These are sodium lights, in which electrically excited sodium metal vapor emits light in the yellow part of the spectrum.

The sodium atoms have a strong interaction for a narrow range of yellow light frequencies. If you shine yellow light into sodium vapor, the sodium atoms absorb the light. (They re-emit the light in another direction so it doesn't reach you.) So sodium vapor is opaque to yellow light.

Dr. Hau experimented with

this. When she shone a yellow laser light at the sodium atoms, they absorbed that wavelength almost as well as a block of lead would have. However, Dr. Hau then shone another wavelength of laser light onto the sodium. This second laser beam made it so that the sodium could not absorb the original beam of yellow light, via a process known as laser-induced transparency. But the sodium atoms still interacted strongly with the yellow light, slowing it down without actually absorbing it! (In her experiment about 1/3 of the yellow photons made it through the sodium cloud.)

Dr. Hau then proceeded to cool the sodium atoms down to one of the coldest temperatures ever achieved in a laboratory anywhere — 50 nanokelvins, just 50 billionths of a degree above absolute zero! As the atoms cooled they slowed down.

All atoms obey Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. As the atoms slowed, their momentum became closer and closer to zero with less and less uncertainty. Heisenberg assures us that this means that their location in space then must become uncertain. The location became so uncertain that the sodium atoms began to overlap. All of the sodium atoms began to behave



like one quantum mechanically coupled object. When changing their quantum state by absorbing energy, they all had to change their quantum state together. This quantum coupled system is known as a Bose-Einstein Condensate, or BEC, after Bose and Einstein who predicted it in 1924. (Okay — we are talking about quantum mechanics, but we aren't treating light quantum mechanically here; we're treating atoms. If you want to know more about BECs, we suggest you check out <http://www.colorado.edu/physics/2000/bec/index.html>.)

It was in this BEC of sodium atoms that Lene Hau managed to slow light. She fired in a pulse of light and timed how long it took to cross the cigar-shaped region of the BEC. Using the first equation Paul ever learned in fourth grade — velocity equals distance divided by time — she calculated the speed of light through the condensate and found it to be slowed to 17 m/s.

## THE SCIENCE FICTION CONNECTION

Lene Hau succeeded in slowing the speed of light to 17 meters per second in 1998. As usual, a science fiction author was way ahead of the scientists.

Back in 1966, Bob Shaw was nominated for the Nebula Award for a short story titled "Light of Other Days." This story, like most good science fiction, uses a technological development to get at some basic emotional truths. The technological development is "slow glass," a material that slows light down. Light shining into a piece of slow glass that's 6 millimeters thick comes out the other side ten years later. A piece of slow glass in a window frame lets city dwellers replace their view of a dingy city with a beautiful natural scene that changes with the seasons. A troubled couple, considering the purchase of a pane of slow glass, discovers some things about love and loss and what really matters.

After reading Bob Shaw's short story, Paul immediately wanted to "do the numbers." Rounding off to show that he is indeed a physicist and not a mathematician, Paul found that the light in the slow glass traveled about  $1/2$  a millimeter a year. That means that the light travels about  $5 \times 10^{-4}$  m in  $3 \times 10^7$  s or about  $2 \times 10^{-11}$  m/s. That's about one atomic diameter in 5 seconds! That's slow!

One difference between Bob Shaw's slow glass and Lene Hau's sodium BEC is that Bob Shaw's

works across the entire visible spectrum and so recreates scenes in full color, while Dr. Hau's works only at one precise frequency. Other wavelengths or frequencies of light speed through the sodium at nearly the speed of light in a vacuum.

Dr. Hau hopes to be able to improve her result soon, slowing

light even more to a few centimeters per second. But she still has a long way to go to catch up to the vision of Bob Shaw.

Note: For more about Pat Murphy's and Paul Doherty's work, check out their web sites at: [www.exo.net/jaxxx](http://www.exo.net/jaxxx) and [www.exo.net/~pauld](http://www.exo.net/~pauld).

### DISAPPEARING PENNIES

Water slows light down — and can bend it in the process.

You'll need: a penny, a shallow bowl, a pitcher of water, and a helper.

Put the penny in the bowl. Close one eye and stoop down or step back until the rim of the bowl just blocks your view of the penny.

Have your helper pour water into the bowl. Ask him or her to pour the water slowly so that the penny doesn't move. When the water is deep enough, the penny will reappear.

You see the penny because light bouncing off the coin gets into your eye and makes an image. The water bends the light that's reflecting from the penny so that it gets over the rim of the bowl into your eyes.



*Eleanor Arnason is the author of such novels as To the Resurrection Station, Daughter of the Bear King, and A Woman of the Iron People, which won both the James Tiptree, Jr. Award and the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Best Novel. She lives in Minneapolis and contributes frequently to Asimov's SF and to Tales of the Unanticipated, but this story marks her first appearance here. Readers interested in the alien Hwarth culture can find much more about them in Ms. Arnason's novel Ring of Swords.*

# The Actors

## A Hwarhath Historical Romance

By Eleanor Arnason

THERE WERE TWO WOMEN who fell in love. At first this was no problem. Their families were allies and trading partners whose ships plied the

narrow ocean between the coast of Sorg and the Great Southern Continent.

The northern family was Sorg itself. Numerous, prosperous, clever and arrogant, these folk gave their name to an entire region.

In recent centuries the coast of Sorg has been improved in many ways: land drained and turned to agriculture, canals dug to carry away excess water and for transportation. The coastal people still prefer boats to the railroad, which they claim is noisy, dirty and unnatural. "If the Goddess had meant us to ride on iron rails, she would not have given us so much water."

Most of the year a steady wind blows off the ocean. Modern silent windmills stand everywhere, their metal blades flashing "like a flock of little suns" in the words of a famous poem. These power the country's many drainage pumps and the even more numerous air cooling machines,

which make the climate of Sorg tolerable to foreigners as long as they remain indoors.

In ancient times the coast was a place of brackish marshes, slow rivers, shallow bays and heat. The inhabitants would have been gray if they'd kept all their fur, as they do now, being influenced by air conditioning and the opinions of other cultures. In those days, however, both men and woman cropped their outer layers of hair, leaving only the soft white undercoat; and many decorated themselves by shaving certain areas down to the bare dark skin.

Imagine a folk with snowy fur so short that it hides no detail of the bodies underneath. Dark lines zigzag or coil over their angular shoulders and long narrow backs. (The Sorg have always been a tall and bony people.) Often their faces are partially shaved as well, becoming patterned masks from which stare eyes as blue as the ocean. Savages, we'd call them now. In their time they were matriarchs, warriors, explorers and merchants.

Their country was rich, providing them with fish, shellfish, birds of many kinds and *luatin*, which came into the coastal bays to breed. Though it is never easy to kill these massive animals, lust makes them less wary than usual; and many of the bays could be turned into traps. In the coastal marshes the *wis* plant bloomed, red as blood or fire. Its sap made (and makes) a famous scarlet dye.

The southern family was Helwar. Their home was an island which lies off the northeast corner of the Great Southern Continent. A polar current runs up the continent's eastern coast and coils around the island, bringing cold water, cool air, rain, and fog. The rain nourished the Helwar forests; the icy current gave them fish; the cool air made their flocks grow long thick wool. The family wealth, such as it was, came from these four sources: fish, wool, lumber, and ships. At the time of this story the Helwar made the best ships in the world.

It was the Helwar ships, seen in their own harbors and other places, which drew the Sorg south, traveling in wide wallowing barges better fit for rivers than the ocean. As rich as they were, they lacked the Helwar skill. To gain it, or at least the use of it, they offered an alliance.

How could the Helwar refuse these towering white and black people? An agreement was made and confirmed with gifts, though the Sorg did not offer the one gift that makes an alliance unbreakable: their men as fathers

for Helwar children. No bond is stronger than kinship. The offspring of such a mating would connect the two families as long as they and their descendants lived.

The Helwar made hints, which the Sorg pretended not to understand. Growing desperate, for they really wanted this alliance, the Helwar matriarchs made an offer of their own. They would send the five best and most promising young men in their lineage north to father children among the Sorg. The Helwar's new allies hesitated and consulted among each other, while the Helwar waited anxiously; and some of the islanders began to mutter that this might not be such a good deal. Maybe they ought to find more willing trading partners. Finally the Sorg agreed, though in a way that seemed grudging and reluctant.

"This is a beginning," said the Helwar matriarchs to each other. "Once they have our ships, they will understand the appeal of a stronger alliance."

When the Sorg left, five Helwar men — sturdy warriors — traveled with them. The motion of the Sorg barges was terrible, they reported later. "No wonder these folk want our ships. And the heat of their homeland! We're surprised that we didn't shrivel up like fish in a smoke house. But the job is done. All five women are pregnant."

Reassured, the Helwar built ships for their new allies: deep-hulled ocean flyers. When the ships were finished, sailors had to be trained; and this is how this story's heroine came to Helwar. She arrived in the southern autumn, along with other young folk, female and male. All had short hair. Many shaved. What a sight they must have been among the furry, fog-gray southerners!

The Helwar divided them, assigning each gender to the proper kind of ship. Like most of the peoples of the narrow ocean, they had both male and female vessels. The former explored new regions and traded in areas known to be dangerous. The latter kept to established routes, doing business with allies.

Sorg Ahl ended on the *Foam Bird*. The captain — Helwar Ki — was short, sturdy, and as gray as the winter ocean or the cloud-wrapped peaks of her island home.

Now we have brought together the story's first pair of lovers, as gangling Ahl walks up the gangway of the *Bird*, carrying her journey bag

over one shoulder. Ki looks down at her, admiring the foreign woman's grace and evident confidence, but despising the unfamiliar haircut.

There are dark triangles below Ahl's eyes, both pointing down. A third triangle, this one pointing up, occupies most of her forehead. Rows of dark squares go down her arms. A final downward-pointing triangle rests between her upper pair of breasts, in no way concealed by her vest, which seems scanty to Ki.

The ship had two private cabins. One was for the captain. Ki put the foreigner in the other one, safely away from the rest of the crew. She was the only daughter of Sorg on board.

At first, as might be expected, Ahl kept herself aloof, though she was a hard worker and eager to learn. Then one day Ki noticed Ahl had stopped shaving. She asked about this.

"It's not easy to shave on board a ship," the northerner answered. "Especially in the weather we've been having, and I don't enjoy the feeling that ice-cold rain and spray produce when they beat against my bare skin. Finally — " She gave Ki a sideways glance. "I'm tired of looking like a foreigner."

After that Ahl became more friendly. By midwinter she'd stopped cutting her fur. "You people look so comfortable," she told Ki and ran a hand along the other woman's arm, ruffling, then smoothing the winter-thick hair. Ki noticed she was falling in love, but kept quiet, having no idea how to court a person who came from so far away.

In early spring they carried a cargo of pickled fish to a harbor on the eastern coast of the Great Southern Continent. The trip was stormy. By the time they reached land and tied up in protected water, all of them were exhausted. Nonetheless most of the crew went on shore. The lineage that held this part of the coast was connected to the Helwar by generations of interbreeding. They all had relatives in the houses that lined the harbor town's narrow, winding streets.

Ki and Ahl stayed on board, Ahl because she was not kin to anyone in the town, Ki out of courtesy and affection. The storm had blown out to sea, and the sky in the east was black; but where their ship rested, the sun shone, and the clouds were mostly white. Farther west, above low hills covered by a semitropical forest, the sky was clear. Hah! It was pleasant to lie on the *Foam Bird's* deck, sharing sunlight and a jug of *halin*. Ahl had

unfastened her vest. Her four breasts were visible: rather flat, especially the lower pair, but with prominent nipples and large oval areolae so dark that they seemed black. Ki felt desire, stronger than before. Something about the day — the stillness, the brightness, their fatigue, the jug of *halin* — made it possible for her to speak. Voice halting, she confessed her love.

Ahl listened courteously, head tilted, blue eyes half closed. When Ki finished, she said, "If that's so, why don't we have sex?"

Ki could think of no reason.

An awning had been raised in the middle of the ship and thick rugs laid under it, so crew members could sleep in open air. They went there and, in the dim light coming through the canvas, gave each other pleasure and release. When they were done, Ahl rolled onto her back and sighed. "It's been a long time."

"Do you have a lover at home?" asked Ki.

"I did, a woman whose family is closely tied to mine. Most likely, she has found someone else by now."

Ki repeated that she was in love.

Ahl raised herself on one elbow and looked at the little southerner. "More likely you find me interesting because I'm foreign."

No, said Ki. It was the true emotion. To prove this she listed the qualities she loved: Ahl's hardworkingness, her courage, her even temper, her sense of justice. "There ought to be a fifth quality, but it doesn't come into my mind."

"This sounds like respect to me," said Ahl.

"Well, then, I love your thin body, your small breasts, your silver fur, your laugh and the place between your legs, which has a taste faintly reminiscent of fish."

Ki loved fish, especially when just pulled from the ocean and lightly cooked in the grill on deck, so this was not an insult.

Ahl laughed. "Maybe you're in love. Let's continue and see what happens next."

At first they tried to be secret. But it's difficult to keep anything hidden on a ship full of women. Soon Ki's cousins took her aside. "Stop this acting and sneaking back and forth between cabins. Everyone knows what's going on. Be open and honest!"

The two women became acknowledged lovers, holding hands in

public, kissing and using the personal form of "you" and "she." This continued until Ahl's training ended, and she was ready to go home.

"I'm going to ask my mother to send me back here as soon as possible," she told Ki. "I don't know if I'm in love; it's not a word that comes easily to me; but I know I'll miss you and the *Foam Bird*."

Ki could say nothing. All her words had become stuck together in a lump at the back of her mouth. Sorrow lay in her mind like a heavy stone.

They parted, Ahl going up a gangway onto one of the ocean-flyers that Helwar had built for Sorg. The flyer spread its sails like great white wings and carried her away across the ocean. Little Ki went back to her own ship to grieve.

**T**HE TRIP NORTH was easy, except for the jokes that everyone made about Ahl's long fur. She ignored her relatives, remaining quiet and aloof.

"Is anything wrong?" they asked finally.

"I'm thinking."

"Don't make yourself ill with ideas."

At home it was the dry season. The marshes of Sorg baked under a cloudless sky, their vegetation turning yellow. The great house where Ahl's mother lived was surrounded by gardens, kept watered except in times of severe drought. Ahl carried her journey bag past brightly colored ornamental plants. She dropped the bag in the entrance room and went looking for her mother.

The matron's favorite place was a porch at one end of the house. The walls were carved wood screens, pierced by many holes. White gauze curtains hung inside the screens, keeping out most bugs, but admitting whatever light and air came through the holes.

This is how you should imagine the room: mostly shadow, but flecked with sunlight which has been slightly dimmed by its passage through gauze. In the middle is a large square table, where Ahl's mother does her accounts, arranging colored stones in rows. Now and then a gust of wind stirs the curtains. When this happens, the room's pattern of light and shadow flickers and shifts.

"Well," the matron said, looking at her daughter. "You need a haircut."



"It's cold in Helwar; I'm planning to return there."

Her mother frowned, then moved a stone from one row to another. "I'm not certain the alliance will hold."

"Why not?"

"They are a small lineage and far away. Aside from their ships, they aren't important. Allies should be neighbors or lineages so powerful they can't be avoided. That's the rule. Everyone knows it." Ahl's mother lifted her head, giving her daughter another look. "None of the children fathered by Helwar is alive."

"What happened?" Ahl asked sharply.

"One woman was not pregnant, though she seemed to be; or possibly she miscarried almost at once. Another woman miscarried at midterm. Two women remained pregnant, but their children died at birth." Her mother's tone permitted no questions. Maybe the children had been deformed or too weak to survive. If so, the midwives would have killed them, rather than let them die slowly or live in pain.

"There's one you haven't accounted for," Ahl said.

"Your cousin Leweli." Her mother looked down again, pondering an arrangement of red and reddish-purple stones. "She went hunting in the marshes. Her boat was found later, floating upside-down. She was not found. She and the child she carried have gone to the same place."

The land of death, Ahl thought. Leweli was dead. "You think this is a sign. The agreement with Helwar is unlucky."

"Maybe. They are a long way off." Her mother paused, white-furred hand hovering over a red stone. "And not important."

Ahl went to her room and unpacked, feeling grief for Leweli, who had been a distant cousin but a close friend, also for the other women who'd lost their children. Lastly, she grieved for herself and Ki.

In time — not her first day at home, nor the second — it occurred to Ahl that Leweli's death was strange. Her cousin had been a fine hunter, not in the least bit careless. Yet she had gone into the marshes alone while pregnant and done something so stupid that it killed her and her child.

Was this likely?

No.

She would go into the marshes and speak with a cousin who lived

there. This woman, closer to Leweli than anyone, might know what had happened.

The next morning Ahl saddled a *tsin*, riding past fields and orchards. The sky, as usual, was cloudless and brilliant. The road was dusty, even when it reached the marshes and wound among waterspears. The plants were in blossom, their tall stalks topped with bladelike flowers as blue as the sky.

The woman Ahl went to visit was named Merhit. A witch, she lived by herself in a thatched hut by one of the marsh's many slow-moving channels. This kind of behavior would not have been tolerated in any other kind of woman. But holy people make their own rules. If they want to live alone, they can.

Ahl reached the hut at noon, dismounted and tied her animal in the shadow of a tree. The witch was sitting in an arbor made of driftwood branches overgrown with vines. For the most part the wood was hidden, but here and there a small piece showed, white as a bone among glossy leaves.

"Well," said Merhit. "You are back."

Ahl squatted, pushing her wide-brimmed hat off her head.

"And you need a haircut," said the witch.

"It was easier to get along with the Helwar if I looked like them. I've fallen in love with one of their daughters, though I don't imagine we have much of a future, if the alliance turns out badly."

"It has turned out as planned," the witch said. "We have the ships we desired and no permanent entanglement in the south."

Ahl considered this remark while looking at the channel's dark water dotted with red-orange flowers. These were not *wis*, as you might think, but a closely related plant, which had no commercial value, though it was lovely. "What happened to Leweli?"

"You know that five women mated with the men of Helwar. One had a mother who might be called weak. She didn't want her daughter to carry a child for most of a year, then lose it."

"What do you mean?" asked Ahl.

"It had been decided that none of the children would live beyond birth."

"Why?"

"The matriarchs of Sorg do not want this alliance. We are a proud family, also careful. The Helwar live far off and have nothing to recommend them except their skill in building ships. We have the ships now."

"They won't last forever. What if we need more?"

"That problem will be dealt with when it comes forward and can be seen. Our family is proud and careful, but does not always look into the distance."

Ahl considered this information, squatting in dust and heat. No question about what the witch was saying: their relatives had decided to kill whatever children came from the Helwar interbreeding. A contemporary woman would be sick with horror or at least uncomfortable. What did Ahl, a woman of the middle distance in time, feel?

Remember how many children died in the days before modern medicine. Those who were deformed or sickly died at once, of course, as they still do. It is a kindness we owe our kin. But many strong and healthy children died as well, due to illnesses which can now be prevented or cured. As a result, in many cultures, babies were called "guests" or "visitors" until they reached the end of their first or second year. Often they were not given a permanent name until it seemed likely they'd remain; and women tried to keep from loving these nameless children too much. If they had thought all the little ones they buried were true people, instead of beings who would turn into people in time and with luck, the women might have died of sorrow.

Because of this, Ahl saw the situation differently than we do. The two children who were killed at birth might have died later. How did she know for certain they'd been healthy? The idea was disturbing, but it did not make her sick.

"What happened to Leweli?" Ahl asked again.

"The mother I mentioned told her daughter to pretend pregnancy. The daughter told Leweli what was going on. By this time Leweli was pregnant; and it turns out she is one of those women who can't bear to lose a child. She knew if she stayed in her mother's house and had the child delivered by midwives, it would die. She came to me."

"She is alive," Ahl said.

"As is her daughter," said the witch. "A fine healthy child, though she has a definite southern look, which I don't find attractive."

"Where?" asked Ahl.

"In the marshes," said the witch after a pause. "I'm not happy about this. The air here breeds too many diseases. As you know, I can foretell the future. The child is important. I knew it the moment I saw Leweli's distended belly. I want the two of them in a place that's safe."

"What can I do?" asked Ahl after a moment.

"Take them to Helwar."

"How?"

"My vision does not see."



HL LEFT, taking a different route, since she wanted time to think. The day grew hotter. She started panting and remembered an inn at the marsh's edge. With luck it was still in business. She made a detour and found the building, standing in the shade of a good-sized *atchul* tree.

Secondary roots hung from the tree's branches, forming a greenish-white curtain. A few had reached the ground and burrowed down, becoming runners that would in time, at a safe distance from the parent tree, send up shoots. This is the *atchul*'s preferred way to grow, though it also flowers and can produce seeds. In youth — and this *atchul* was comparatively young, though larger than usual — it is surrounded by a veil of roots, none thick, most ending in midair.

In middle age the roots increase in size, many dig into the earth; instead of a veil of white filaments, they become a sturdy net. Outside the net, beyond the shadow of their mother, daughter trees rise, stretching out their branches, producing their own curtains or veils.

As the tree reaches old age the roots thicken even further, weighing the branches, pulling them toward the ground. Now the tree stands within a cage made of itself. In this cage, in time, it dies.

The tree is fairly common in the southern marshes, though rare elsewhere. Because of its behavior it has several nicknames: the Veil Tree, for obvious reasons, and the Sewing Tree, because of the way it grows, roots descending, then rising as another tree, then re-descending, as if it were stitching its family into the soil, generation after generation.

Finally it is called the Mother Tree, because it reminds people of their

mothers: large formidable women who sew or figure their accounts in rooms where gauzy curtains hang and billow.

Ahl pushed through the veil of roots and saw the inn clearly. It was more run-down than she remembered, but a cart stood at the entrance. Brightly painted in a foreign style, it must belong to travelers. Ahl dismounted and led her animal into the courtyard.

Two *tsina* stood there, old and bony. One was apparently lame as well. A man stood next to it, examining a forefoot. Something there, in the hornypads or the fissures between the three broad toes, disturbed him. He groaned softly, released the foot — the *tsin* put it down gingerly — looked up and greeted Ahl in a courteous, despondent tone.

Not her concern. She returned the greeting, tied her animal and went inside.

A man sat there. Like the man outside, he was a foreigner with uncut fur. But the man in the courtyard had been middle-aged, while this fellow was barely more than a boy, slender and graceful, though not — it was obvious to Ahl — entirely sober at the moment. He lounged on a bench, his back against the rough trunk of the *atchul*, which formed one wall of the room. The other walls were plastered and white rather than gray, though almost as rough as the *atchul*.

The innkeeper was female and a true daughter of Sorg: tall, thin, white and black. Ahl got beer from her. "Is there another place to be?"

"There is only the patio," the innkeeper said, her tone apologetic.

Anything would be better than sharing a room with an unrelated man. Ahl went out, finding an area paved with stone, shaded by the *atchul*'s leaves and curtained by its roots.

Hah! Better! There was even a breeze that stirred the hot air, bringing the aroma of summer vegetation to her nostrils.

She sat down, tasted the beer — it was cool in her mouth and pleasant on her tongue — then thought about her current situation.

Merhit was asking her to oppose her own mother, as well as all the other senior women of her lineage. No woman did this lightly. Many women — most women — would never do it.

But it was wrong to make a contract with the intention of breaking it, and even more wrong to break a contract made solid by children, and to break the contract in such a way!

No one would question the right of senior women to examine newborn children and decide, "This one should be kept. This one should not."

The job had to be done. A decent self-respecting family, one such as Sorg had always been, could not allow any of its members to die slowly. Nor could a decent family let children who had come out badly continue to live. What future did they have? How could they be happy or useful? The children who were killed held no grudge, as was known by the behavior of their ghosts.

The ghosts of adults are almost always resentful and dangerous. Hungry and angry, they haunt the living, looking for revenge or restitution. But the ghosts of newborn children cause no trouble. They appear in the houses where they were born and died, as if they don't know where else to go, causing no trouble, merely lingering. In time they grow dim and transparent. Finally they vanish. No one is the worse for them. This proves no wrong has been done. The children have lingered out of ignorance and confusion, not because they were angry or felt they had been dealt with unjustly.

The job of judging fitness to live was necessary. But it was the kind of decision that could not be left to the mothers who had borne the children; young women as a group were unsuited to this kind of work; and men were obviously utterly unfit. Beyond question the job was best done by matriarchs full of experience. They judged, then made sure the children — the ones not kept — died without pain.

The children were not always sickly. In times of famine Sorg women had killed healthy children. A great loss, but unavoidable. In addition, Ahl had heard of families who used infanticide to control the number of males and females in each generation. If times were difficult and violent, it made sense to have sons. In good times, one wanted daughters. As far as Ahl knew, the Sorg had never done this. Always confident and proud, they trusted in the Goddess and their own ability to turn any healthy child to a good use, providing the rains fell and crops rose from the soil.

Maybe she would be justified in opposing the matriarchs of Sorg in this case, though the idea made her queasy. But how could she get Leweli and the child away? By ship, of course. But a ship that belonged to Sorg would not take them; and what story could she tell to foreign sailors? Two

women alone were certain to look odd. Why weren't they traveling with kin?

The innkeeper came out. "Those men are quarreling."

"Hah?"

"Quietly, and in a language I don't understand. Nonetheless, it's a quarrel. I didn't want to stay."

Ahl tilted her head in agreement. It was the worst kind of discourtesy for men to argue in front of unrelated women.

"They're actors. Something happened to split their company. These two are all that's left. For some reason they don't want to go home, though it's difficult to see what else they can do."

"Actors are often men of irregular behavior," Ahl said. This was a way of saying the men might be in trouble with their families. A terrible idea, but such things happen, and happened more often in the period of this story. It was the age called the Unraveling. An apparently endless war raged to the north of Sorg, on the continent's Great Central Plain. For a while it had seemed that the great warleader Eh Manhata would bring peace by defeating all rival armies. But Manhata had died a year before; and the war continued with increased savagery.

The innkeeper sat down and drank from the cup she carried. "I've thought they might be criminals or outcasts, though they're both very civil, and the older man has been through here before, causing no trouble.

"I saw him act the last time. He had a company of five, and they did the death of some hero. I forget which one, but he had a red robe and died impressively, after a lot of talk — about honor, mostly, as I remember. When the talk stopped, he gave a yell, and crash! Down he went! The men of Sorg are usually quieter when they die. What is there to talk about, anyway, in these situations?"

Ahl could think of no comment, though she'd enjoyed the few plays she had seen. She finished her beer and went to get her *tsin*, going around the outside of the inn, so as to avoid the quarreling men. When she looked closely, she saw the cart was shabby, its carving worn, its paint chipped and faded.

She got home at dusk. Great tall clouds were blowing in from the southwest. Lightning flickered around their tops.

The storm broke after dark. Thunder woke Ahl. She lay in bed,

listening to wind and rain. This was the way summer ended in her country. The season for safe ocean travel was almost gone. The task she had been given would become more difficult with every day that passed.

**S**HE WENT to Sorg Harbor the next morning. This was not a harbor town like the ones she had visited in the south: rows of houses climbing over hills; steep streets paved with stone; marketplaces, also paved; and gardens, mostly private; but the people of the far south were not clutching, nor did they live in fear of thieves. It was a habit for them to share their gardens with passersby. Not everything, but something. Vines grew on the tops of walls. Pots of flowers stood by doors. Trees were left untrimmed, so their branches stretched over the street, dropping seeds in spring and leaves in autumn. In one town Ahl had walked through clouds of floating gauze. In another the streets had been carpeted with leaves as orange as fire. In a third there had been flowers, tiny and purple, dotting pale gray paving stones. Looking up, she had seen a flowering tree.

The Sorg preferred living on the farms established by their ancestors, and they saw no reason to make the stays of foreign visitors comfortable. Their harbor town consisted of storage barns. Here and there it was possible to find an inn, though most foreign sailors and merchants stayed on their ships, which were more pleasant and less expensive. The streets were unpaved and badly rutted. Unused ground was either bare or full of weeds.

The harbor itself was a wide bay. Five docks extended into it. Two were for local fishing boats, empty at present: the boats were at work far out on the ocean.

It was the other docks that interested Ahl. Five deep-bellied freighters were tied along them. Shading her eyes, she surveyed each deck. All the sailors were black and white: members of her lineage or of closely allied families.

This was bad news, but it might not be the only news. Ahl reined her *tsin* at one of the taverns along the waterfront. These were the only structures in town that looked welcoming and pleasant. They were a kind of building that used to be common along the south coast. A wooden



framework is anchored in large ceramic pots. Vines grow out of the pots and over the frame, creating an arbor open on one side. The taverns all looked toward the harbor. What else would interest sailors?

Inside were benches and more pots, these with narrow mouths. Beerflies whirled around them or crawled on their lips. Ahl dipped beer into a cup, paid for it and sat down.

"Where are you from?" asked a black and white sailor.

"Sorg."

"You need a haircut, then."

"I've been traveling. I'll find a barber now that I'm home."

The sailors went back to their conversation, which was about ships, as are all conversations in a harbor town. A Batanin women's ship had left the day before, early enough so the storm wouldn't have caught it close to shore, and there was a Taig ship outside the harbor, waiting for high water.

"It will be men," a male sailor added. Obviously he was Sorg or he wouldn't have been sitting with Sorg women, even in an arbor with an open front. "The Taig women don't travel. The ocean is dangerous, they say, and uncomfortable."

The other sailors — all women — grinned, tilting their heads in mocking agreement. The Taig women were right, of course, but there was more to the ocean than danger and discomfort. Let the Taig be timid, if they wished. The women of Sorg would sail, having confidence in their new ships and their family's traditional courage and strength.

No other foreign ships were expected.

Ahl drank her beer and left, riding home thoughtfully.

"Where have you been?" her mother asked.

"At Sorg Harbor."

"You are turning into a restless woman, and you still need to get a haircut."

"You're right that I've become restless," Ahl said. "I think I'll pay another visit to the marshes."

"Better that than the ocean," her mother said. "But I expect you to settle down soon."

The next day Ahl took her questions to the marsh witch and found Leweli visiting. Her cousin's fur — like her own — had not been cut recently, though for a different reason. The marsh was full of bugs, Leweli

said. She wanted as much protection as she could get. "And Merhit, in spite of all her skills, is not a barber."

The fur had grown to its full length and was as gray as fog. The baby nursing at Leweli's upper left breast was the same color, though dappled.

"I've never seen anything like this before," Leweli said, sounding worried.

"It's common among the island folk," said Ahl. "Baby spots they call the condition. The spots usually fade, though now and then a person remains dappled. I have seen old grandmothers with spots and venerable men as well."

Her cousin frowned, looking at the child, who had finished eating and gone to sleep. "I hope they fade. Though I don't suppose it will matter, if she spends her life in a marsh."

"She won't," Merhit said firmly.

At this point Ahl explained her problem. How could she take Leweli and the baby south, if there were no ships in port except those belonging to relatives? "I could make up a story, explaining why we need to go south. But I have never been a good liar."

"This is true," said Leweli.

"And you know that any Sorg captain would check the story with my mother."

"You will have to go in disguise," said the witch. "How fortunate that both of you have uncut fur. You can pass as foreigners."

"Until we open our mouths and Sorg voices come out," Ahl said. "In any case, it's too late in the season. I don't think any of our family's ships will be going out again."

The witch frowned and was silent for a while. Finally she said, "The Taig ship will be leaving. Go with them."

"Two women and a child, traveling alone? How likely are they to take us?"

"This plan is doomed," said Leweli. "I'll have to stay here with you, Merhit."

"First of all, the marsh is unhealthy," the witch replied. "Secondly, I have visitors. Sooner or later you will be discovered. Imagine the trouble we'll be in then. Finally, I know the child belongs with her father's kin. I have seen that."

No way to argue with a witch who's had a vision. Ahl was silent. Leweli placed the baby in a basket lined with vegetation. The tiny hands were closed. Ahl couldn't see the bare skin of the palms. But the soles of the feet were visible and dark gray. So were the four nipples, emerging from the fog-gray fur like buds. Even the dappling seemed lovely to Ahl, since it reminded her of the Helwar and Ki.

"Tell me everything that has happened to you since you left my house two days ago," Merhit said finally. "Maybe there's something that will help me find a path out."

Ahl complied. After she finished Leweli said, "Would the actors take us north with them? It sounds as if they're in trouble already; they might not mind a bit more trouble, especially if we paid them."

Ahl realized she hadn't thought about money. "Do we have any?"

"I do," Merhit said. "So does your mother."

"Are you suggesting that I rob my mother?" Ahl asked, horrified.

"One thing at a time," said Merhit. "I want to answer Leweli first. You shouldn't go north. There's a war on, as you ought to remember, and it has gotten so bad that even women aren't entirely safe. I've heard stories of bandits — " She paused, apparently unwilling to continue. "The child belongs in the south."

The child opened her eyes, revealing sea-gray irises. It was a southern color. Leweli had blue eyes, as did Ahl and Merhit and almost all the Sorg.

"Have you named her?" Ahl asked, remembering Ki's gray eyes.

"Not yet. When I need to call her something, it's Darling or Dapple. A real name will come later, if she lives."

"I'm going to meet with the actors," Merhit said. Moving quickly, as witches do when they have made up their minds, she saddled her *tsin* and rode off. This was not the animal we know in modern times, descended from chargers used by warriors on the Great Central Plain. Instead this was a swamp *tsin*: short, stocky, thick-legged and broad-footed. Its coat was greenish-tan with pale, thin, vertical stripes which enabled it to blend with the marsh reeds. No breed of *tsina* is better over dubious ground. No breed is harder to find if it doesn't want finding.

Ahl knew all of this, of course, and paid no attention to the *tsin*. Instead she settled down to admire the baby and talk with her cousin.

Admiring a baby takes time, if it's done properly, and talking about

one's family takes even longer. The afternoon passed without notice. All at once the light was slanting, and the witch rode back in view.

"Well?" asked Ahl.

Merhit dismounted, groaned and rubbed her behind. "It's just as I thought. I know the actor. He's been here often, though his former tours were luckier. What the innkeeper told you is true. His company has split apart, and he is left with one companion. They don't want to go back north. 'War is bad for every kind of art,' Perig said to me, 'except the art of war.' There may be other reasons, unpaid bills or the kinds of trouble actors get into.

"I offered him money to go south across the ocean and take the two of you, disguised as actors. Obviously it's a dubious enterprise, but he's desperate; and he knows I'm a good and reliable witch. I cured him of a throat inflammation that wouldn't go away. That was several years ago, but an actor remembers!

"He'll meet the two of you tomorrow at sunrise on the marsh road. Keep going till you meet him."

"Are we leaving already?" Leweli asked in a worried tone.

"Of course not. He has to train you. I'll mind the baby."

That was that. Ahl rode home on her animal, which was a crossbreed, larger and swifter than a true marsh *tsin* and less careful about where it put its feet: a good animal for ordinary use and warfare on solid ground.

That evening she sat with her mother and two aunts in a porch with gauze curtains. Hanging lanterns filled the room with light. Ahl's senior relatives sewed, while Ahl sharpened a favorite knife. Long and narrow, it was the best tool she had for cleaning fish.

"We're getting tired of waiting for you to settle down," an aunt said.

"We don't usually produce flighty women in this house," the second aunt added.

Ahl's mother kept at her cross-stitch, saying nothing, though she glanced at her daughter.

"Give me a few more days," Ahl said. "It's disturbing to live in a foreign place."

"We'll remember this in the future," her mother said.

The aunts tilted their heads in agreement.

"If we send any of our family off a second time, it will be men."

"Or women who are not promising."

"Though your kin haven't come back restless, as you have," Ahl's mother added.

Ahl ran her whetstone along the knife's blade. "What can I say?"

"There is nothing to say," her mother replied. "Remember who you are. And do!"

Ahl excused herself soon after that and went to her bed, not through the house's winding corridors, but outside through the garden. The air was cool and full of the scent of herbs. The sky was clear and starry. A meteor blazed in the north. Watching it, she swore two things. By the Goddess, she would find her way back to the Helwar and Ki. By the Goddess, she would not turn out like her mother!

She made the morning rendezvous on time. The men stood on the road, sun rising behind them. They'd brought their one healthy *tsin*, which grazed nearby. As Ahl dismounted, Leweli arrived on the witch's *tsin*.

"We went to the harbor yesterday," the older man said. "The Taig ship was planning to leave tomorrow, but will wait one extra day. Everything must be ready by tomorrow night. A challenge, let me tell you! But actors are used to rapid changes of plan and fortune."

"This is true," said the younger man with a glinting smile.

The men pulled clothing out of their animal's bags: male tunics, belts, swords and strips of fabric. "Put these on," the older man said. "Use the strips of fabric to bind your breasts till they're as flat as you can make them. We'll take a walk down the road while you dress. Be rapid! We have one day to teach you how to behave like men."

They worked till noon, the women walking and turning, bending, hefting tools and weapons, speaking. The men watched and made comments or demonstrated the right way to stride and pull a sword. At midday they rested in the shade of an *atchul*, a sapling with no secondary roots, which had apparently popped up out of nowhere. The mother tree was nowhere in view.

The older man, whose name was Perig, said, "I think you'd best pretend to be actors who specialize in female parts. They are usually tall, and they often have feminine mannerisms." He paused and gave the women a quick sideways glance. "I really can't imagine you as the kind of actors who play warriors or romantic leads."

"Well enough," said Ahl. "I've never wanted to be a soldier, even in pretense."

"They have the best roles," said the older man in a comfortable tone.

"I prefer lovers," said the younger man, whose name was Cholkwa.

"Well that you should," said Perig. "You have the beauty and grace required of such roles."

"But not the passion and darkness required of heroes," added the younger man. This sounded like an old argument, possibly a teasing one, though Ahl couldn't tell for sure.

"That will come. Youth is not a time for passion."

"It isn't!" asked Ahl, surprised.

"The young experience lust, which is a fine and useful feeling. How else can a young man move away from his mother? How else can he form friendships? And the best friendships are those formed when young. But real passion, the kind that can be acted, comes later. You'll see this, when you see me act."

When noon was past they got up and practiced more. At last, when the sun was low in the west, the actors called a halt.

"I've done what I can," Perig said. "Meet us here tomorrow at midafternoon, and bring the money for our passage. The Taig will want to be paid the moment we're on board."

Leweli tilted her head. The two kinswomen rode off together. When they were safely away from the men, Leweli said, "Merhit has a message for you. Bring what money you can find."

"She wants me to rob my mother," Ahl said.

"Yes." Leweli reined the witch's *tsin*, though it wasn't easy, since the animal knew it was going home. At last it came to a halt. Ahl stopped her more-obliging animal.

"We both know your mother has a cache under the floor in her counting porch. Most likely you know the exact stone and how to raise it."

"This is horrible," Ahl said.

"It was horrible for me when I realized they were going to kill my child, not because it was sick or deformed, but to escape an agreement they never intended to keep. Obviously it is shameful to rob one's mother. But haven't we been shamed already? What have our relatives left us in the way of honesty and honor?"

Ahl groaned and tilted her head in agreement.

That night she went to her mother's counting porch and pried up the right stone. Gold shone in the light of the tiny lamp she carried: coins, bracelets, chains, ingots and works of art that were too badly damaged to be shown: a mounted warrior with a missing head, a *luat* with two missing flippers, a statue of the Goddess in her guise of creator. The statue was hollow and had gotten crushed. Ahl could still recognize the Great One, her tools in her hands, the hammer that beat out the heavens, the axe that chopped out the earth; but it wasn't easy.

Coins would be the safest. They were least likely to be missed. She gathered two handfuls, then replaced the stone and hurried away, feeling self-disgust.

It was impossible to sleep now. Instead she went to the stable and saddled her animal. In the first light of dawn she rode to the marsh. The day was hot already; Ahl felt queasy; it wasn't a real sickness, she decided, but rather fear and shame. When she reached the witch's cabin, she found Merhit outside, crouched next to a fire, brewing a potion. "It will keep the child sleepy and quiet. I have a wicker chest to put her in. She'll be able to breathe. Did you bring the money?"

Ahl pulled it out. Merhit examined the coins, putting several off to the side. "These are distinctive. Better to take only coins in common use. The ship will be in harbor tonight. Board after dark. By sunrise you'll be on the open ocean. I'll hide your animal. When you are missed, your relatives will think you've run away or died in the marsh like Leweli. No one will connect you with a band of actors going south by sea."

"The innkeeper knows there are only two men in the acting company."

"Maybe two of their companions came back. Maybe they found new companions." The witch stirred her potion, looking thoughtful. "Maybe I should talk to the innkeeper. She knows I met with the actors; and your mother knows that you have been visiting me. I'm a closer neighbor than your mother or any of the matriarchs. She won't talk, if I tell her not to. But I have to say this business of weaving plots isn't easy. I'm going back to ordinary magic as soon as you and Leweli are gone."

When the potion was cooked through and cooled, she fed a spoonful to the baby.

"Why are you doing this now?" asked Leweli.

"To make sure the dose is right. People vary in how they respond to magic, and it's always hard to judge how much to give a baby."

Soon Dapple was asleep, lying in the green shade of the witch's arbor. She looked, Ahl thought, like a *sul* cub: newborn, soft and round, still covered with down. All too soon the down is lost, giving way to rough fur and scales. But for a while such cubs have an unequaled charm.

Merhit poured the rest of the potion into jars and sealed them, pausing now and then to examine the baby. "The dose is right," she said at last. "This is a healthy sleep, neither light nor heavy. She held out a spoon made of horn, yellow and translucent. "Take this. Always use it. Give the child a spoonful when you want her to be quiet, but never more than five times a day."

"Is the potion dangerous?" Leweli asked.

"All magic is dangerous," Merhit said.

A little after noon the women set off. Leweli and Ahl rode double. Merhit, on her marsh *tsin*, carried Dapple in the wicker chest.

When they reached the rendezvous, the men were there with their one healthy animal, loaded with baggage now. "Take your costumes and go down the road," Perig said. "We'll load your bags while you change."

"Not the baby," Leweli said. "It's hot already and will get hotter. I don't want her in that box."

"What are you going to do with her?" Cholkwa asked.

"Carry her till the sun goes down."

The two men looked at each other. "Very well," said Perig. "But if anyone comes, you'll have to hide in the marsh."

Leweli agreed. The two women changed clothing, Ahl binding all four of her breasts. Leweli, however, left her upper pair free and used the binding strip to make a sling for Dapple. "If she wakes, I can feed her."

They rejoined the men, and Perig said, "Another thing has occurred to me. By the time we reach Sorg Harbor, you are going to smell of milk and the baby."

"This is true," said Merhit, who was still on her *tsin*, watching everything.

"I also have a solution to this problem," Perig said. "Or rather, Cholkwa does."



The young man looked puzzled.

The older man smiled. "He likes perfume and always has a jar. We'll pour it over Leweli —"

"What?" cried Cholkwa.

"When we reach the south, dear one, I'll buy you more."

Cholkwa opened his mouth.

"You can argue on the way," said Merhit. "Be careful! And be lucky!" She turned her *tsin* and rode off, leading Ahl's animal.

The journey to Sorg Harbor was uneventful. They met no one. Only a fool would travel through weather like this, Perig remarked. Late in the afternoon they took shelter against the heat, resting in the shadow of a half-grown *atchul* tree. Sister trees stood in the distance, but Ahl couldn't find the mother. Had it fallen? Was this an omen? Would she ever see her mother again? Imagining the matriarch's fury, Ahl decided she might not want to.

At sunset the four continued on their way, trudging through the long summer dusk into a starry night. By the time they reached Sorg Harbor the buildings were dark.

They stopped. Leweli put her baby in the wicker chest and, with Ahl's help, strapped her upper breasts. The two men went off to relieve themselves. When they returned, Perig got out the perfume and dowsed Leweli.

"Too much," said Cholkwa. "You know what she smells like now."

"Like a man who sells the use of his body to other men," said Perig cheerfully. "Better that than a mother. In the future, please remember to use the male pronoun when speaking of Leweli or Ahl. They are men now."

"With a baby in a box," said Cholkwa.

"As you say," Perig agreed in the same cheerful tone. He looked toward the women. Ahl could see starlight shining on his eyes. "You need new names. How does Lewekh sound? And Ahlin?"

"Good enough," said Ahl.

Perig led them through dark streets. A few dim lanterns shone in the harbor, aboard docked ships. One was the *TaigFar Traveler*. A sleepy male voice asked, "Who?"

"The actors," said Perig.

"Come on board."

Tired and half-asleep, Ahl helped unfasten the chest. She and Leweli carried it into a cabin. A lamp hung from the ceiling; the still air stank of burning fish oil. Ahl forced open the cabin window. "It'll be better once we're under way."

"Good," said Leweli.

The men followed with bags, then left again. The *tsin* had to be delivered to its new owner. Ahl searched the cabin. A row of cabinets went along one wall. Inside were five hammocks, neatly rolled, and five pots of fired clay, good-sized and glazed inside. The lids fit tightly. One was clearly for urination. She could tell by the shape and the emblem drawn on the outside. She didn't know the purpose of the others.

Leweli spread her bedroll on the floor, but Ahl — a sailor — hung up one of the hammocks, fastening it to iron hooks in the cabin walls. Along with the lamp and the cabinets, these were the cabin's only furniture. A spare folk, the Taig.

Lying in her hammock, she regarded the lamp, which was iron and shaped like a fish with bulbous glass eyes. Light shone out the eyes and through a hole in the fish's back. Taig art. The Sorg would never make anything so grotesque. Thinking this, Ahl went to sleep.

Waking, she felt the ship in motion. The fish was dark. Daylight came through the window. She could make out Leweli, sleeping next to the wicker chest, one hand on it. The men were not present. Had they slipped off in the night? Were she and Leweli alone among male strangers? A disturbing idea! She rose and used the pot-for-urination, then went on deck. Perig and Cholkwa were there, leaning on the ship's side, watching blue waves go past.

"Good morning, Ahlin," Perig said. "Cholkwa is a little queasy. I thought he'd be better up here."

"And you?" asked Ahl.

"No kind of travel bothers me."

She stayed a while with the men. For better or worse the journey had begun. There was a kind of relief in simply beginning. As to the end, who could say? With luck, she'd find Ki.

The first two days of the voyage were bright, with a strong wind blowing out of the north. Nothing could be better! They sped toward

Helwar over foaming water. Leweli stayed in their cabin, afraid that the Taig sailors would see through her disguise, afraid as well to leave the baby alone.

"A good actor and a bad traveler," Perig said in explanation. "Poor Lewekh is often queasy, but if you could see him play a matron mourning the death of her male relations! A stone would groan and grieve!"

"I would like to see this," said the Taig captain politely.

Ahl preferred to be on deck, listening to Perig tell stories about his acting career, though he never mentioned the trouble that had left him with one companion.

At night they had to share the same cabin. The two men slept on the floor, keeping as far from the women as was possible. They were not perverts, Perig said in a reassuring tone. "Neither one of us has ever touched a woman, except for close relatives when we were children. Nor will we. Men like us are never used to fulfill breeding contracts. What lineage would want the kind of traits we have?"

This was true, as Ahl realized. The most important male virtue is directness. How could an actor have this quality? Surely — to do his work — he had to be devious. Nor did it seem likely that an actor's life would encourage loyalty, the second male virtue. Always traveling, living a series of lies, how could men like Perig and Cholkwa be loyal, except possibly to one another?

In thinking this, Ahl showed the prejudice of her time. Now we understand that honesty can manifest itself in more than one way, and that people can travel long distances from home without becoming disloyal.

But it wasn't simply prejudice that made her think of actors as men of doubtful virtue. In those days acting was a trade halfway in shadow. Many actors were runaways; and not a few were criminals: thieves and prostitutes, usually, though there had been one famous acting troop which supplemented its income with banditry.

"Understandable, given the quality of their acting," Perig said when he told Ahl about this group. "Eh Manhata caught them finally and told them to put on a play. Maybe they thought he'd leave them alive, if they could please him. They did their best, and he had them all beheaded. It wasn't a judgment on their acting, but it could have been."

Were her two companions thieves? Ahl wondered uneasily, then remembered that she was a thief and beyond question disloyal to her family. In addition she was pretending to be a man. Hah! She was most of the way into darkness! Maybe she ought to finish the job and become an actor, though women never did.

On the third day the wind shifted, blowing out of the west. Black clouds loomed there, lightning flashing around them: the first autumn storm. The Taig men reefed their sails. In spite of this the ship's speed increased. The waves grew taller and changed color, becoming dark green with thick white streaks of foam. The air filled with flying spray. "Get below," the Taig captain said to them.

They obeyed. Leweli was in the cabin already, throwing up in a pot which had not been used till now.

"This is turning into a difficult situation," Perig said.

"Yes," said Cholkwa in a strange voice and found a pot of his own.

The cabin window was already shut. Ahl checked to make sure it was secure, then sat down. The ship was well-made, though not of Helwar quality; and the crew were good sailors, the captain especially. Nonetheless they might go down. Such things happened. It was terrible to sit here quietly! She mentioned to Perig that she was trained as a sailor.

"The captain sent us below for a reason," he replied. "Respect his knowledge; and remember how wet it is on deck. If you go up, your clothing will be soaked at once. It will cling to your body. The Taig men will know you're a woman."

This was true. Ahl tilted her head in agreement. Above her the fish lamp swung back and forth, casting shadows that danced over the walls. Leweli and Cholkwa were still throwing up. Perig sat on the floor, arms clasped around his knees, in a pose of patient endurance. Seeking distraction, Ahl opened the wicker chest. The child Dapple slept quietly, as if in the witch's arbor. She laid a thick cloth over her legs for protection, then lifted the child out. How delicate the body between her hands! How soft the fur! How light the weight when she laid Dapple in her lap! Ahl watched the baby sleep, the tiny chest rising and falling gently. The eyes were not perfectly shut. Now and then, when the lantern's light shifted, a gleam shone between the gray lids. Hah! It made Ahl feel tender! As did the loosely curled hands, their nails uncut and curving over the fingertips like claws.

It occurred to her that the potion's magic might work on full-grown people. At the moment Leweli and Cholkwa were both lying down. If they were making any noise, Ahl was not able to hear it over the sound of water rushing, the creak and groan of wood. But neither looked comfortable.

So.

Ahl laid Dapple in the chest, then filled the horn spoon with potion, bringing it to her cousin. Leweli glanced up, her expression despairing.

"Try this," said Ahl, kneeling.

Leweli hesitated. The ship made a sudden loud noise and shuddered around them. That was enough. Leweli took the potion.

If that was the right dose for a child, then the mother needed more. Ahl went back to the jar.

When she finished with Leweli, she took the jar to Perig and explained her idea, speaking loudly through the ship's noise. The actor smiled and carried the jar to his companion.

Leweli and Cholkwa dozed, looking more comfortable than before. Perig sat as before. After a while Ahl began to feel queasy. The jar of potion was still mostly full. She ate a spoonful. The flavor was medicinal, sharp and herby. Soon she noticed her body was relaxing. Instead of fear and nausea, she felt a pleasant drowsiness. She lay down, one hand on the chest where Dapple slept, dreamt of Ki and woke to a banging noise.

Was the ship breaking apart? No, it was the Taig captain, beating on their door. The storm was as bad as ever, he told them. All the sails were gone, pulled down or blown away. Still the ship drove east, far off course already. "Pray for us, if you think the Goddess will listen; and if you have charms or know any spells, use them now!"

Then he was gone. The fish lamp swung back and forth. Looking across the cabin, Ahl saw Perig's mouth moving. "Are you reciting magic spells?"

"Speeches out of the plays. Everything I can remember in praise of the Goddess, courage and luck."

This didn't seem useful, but could hardly do harm. Ahl gave more potion to the invalids, the child and herself. Time passed. Now and then, among her dreams, she thought she heard Perig's voice, speaking of honor and fate.

Finally — was it on the third day or the fourth? — the motion and

noise decreased. Perig left the cabin, coming back to say, "The captain thinks we'll survive, though we're far east of the route he planned for us; and I have never seen an ocean like this one."

Ahl couldn't stay put. Pulling a vest over her tunic, she went on deck. The smooth planks shone with water. The air tasted of moisture and salt. Looking up, she saw the main mast still intact, though loose ropes flapped around it, holding pieces of broken spar like fish in a net.

On every side waves rose like mountains capped with snow. What a sight it was! But the ship was moving like a ship, climbing the dark blue slopes, sliding down into deep blue valleys. Before this, when the storm was at its worst, the ship's motion had reminded her of an animal fighting as the butcher's helpers dragged it into the butcher's killing yard.

They were going to live.

The next day was cloudless. Ahl and Perig opened the cabin window and emptied the various pots. Nonetheless the cabin's air remained less than pleasant. The two of them spent most of the day on deck. The waves had decreased in size; and the Taig sailors put up a sail.

"We can steer now," the Taig captain said. "Though not well. We have to put in for repairs. I'm at the eastern edge of my knowledge, beyond all certain ports; and we can't turn back and sail across this wind until the repairs are made."

"Is that so?" said Perig in his usual tone of friendly interest.

"What then?" asked Ahl.

"There are islands out here," the captain answered. "I've heard other captains describe them, and they're marked on my maps, though this far out the maps are unreliable. Some are uninhabited, which would be fine. Others are inhabited by honest fishing people, which would be even better. What I'm worried about is pirates. Also monsters, though I'm not sure the monsters are real. There's no question about the pirates."

The day after, they spotted land. A sailor climbed the main mast. Coming down, he reported no signs of habitation. But there were plenty of trees and a broken coastline that might provide a harbor.

"We'll try it," said the captain.

At sunset they anchored in a little bay edged by sand. Beyond the sand were ledges of rough-looking, dark-brown rock. Trees grew atop the ledges, their foliage the color of weathered bronze. The place made Ahl

uneasy, though the harbor water was still and clear, the sky bright and almost cloudless.

They would spend the night on board, the Taig captain said. Was he simply being cautious, or did he feel — as Ahl did — that the island brooded and held secrets? Being the captain, he did not have to explain himself.

In the morning men went ashore. They returned midway through the afternoon, having gone around the island. It was empty of people, though there were plenty of birds. The sailors brought back firewood and fresh water from a spring. Hah! It was sweet to drink!

"I don't imagine you'll be any help in repairing the ship," the Taig captain said to Perig and Ahl. "But you can work on shore. We'll need more wood, more water, and if any of you know how to hunt or fish —"

"Lew —" Ahl said and paused, then continued. "Lewekh is a fine hunter, though what he knows best is marshes."

"Cholkwa and I have lived off the land," said Perig.

"Do what you can," said the captain.

Cholkwa had no problem with this idea. But Leweli refused. "I can't leave the child alone. What if she wakes and begins to cry? What if she becomes ill? Men can't take care of children."

"The child is healthy as a *tsin* and sleeps like a rock," said Ahl.

"Usually," said Leweli. "But I will not leave her."

In the morning the three of them set off. It was another bright day. Small clouds dotted the sky. A mild wind blew, stirring the bronze-brown forest, making spots of sunlight dance over the ground. There were no trails. Obviously, no large animals lived on the island, though — as the sailors had said — birds were plentiful. So were edible plants, and Perig turned out to be excellent at finding these. Soon he had a basketful. Ahl knew most, though he was especially happy with something she hadn't seen before. "*Tsin* ears," he called the plant. It was fleshy and looked like its name, except for its color, which was a reddish-purple. The plant grew on tree trunks, so it looked as if the trees had ears and were listening: an eerie sight. Perig cut them off, using a knife. The cut ends did not bleed, a relief to Ahl.

On the far side of the island was a moor, covered with low vegetation. The birds there were large and heavy, like the *halpa* which people raise on

many parts of our home planet. Like *halpa*, they flew when startled, but only for a short distance. Then they dropped down and tried to run.

"This can't be called a sport," said Cholkwa and shot one.

Seen close, it was covered with glossy brown feathers, except for its legs and feet, which were naked and bright blue. There were areas of bare skin on the head, circling the animal's round yellow eyes, so it seemed to wear spectacles, though this image would not have occurred to Ahl. In her age spectacles were rare, and it's likely that she never saw a pair.

"What do you think?" asked Cholkwa.

"It looks like a *halpa*," said Perig. "Except for the blue skin. Maybe it's a relative. If so, it ought to be tasty, especially in a stew with my ears."

They spent the midday killing birds. All had the same areas of blue skin. So it wasn't a disease, a thought which had occurred to Ahl. When they had enough, Perig found a long straight branch. They fastened the birds to it by their bright blue feet and carried them back this way, Cholkwa at one end of the stick, Ahl at the other. The wind had died. Ahead of them a trail of smoke rose into the cloudless sky.

"They must be heating pitch," said Perig. "The ship was taking on water, the captain said."

"How could it not?" asked Cholkwa. "If I had known what kind of trip this was going to be —"

"We couldn't stay in Sorg," said Perig. "Nor return to the north; and we have survived the journey."

"Wait till we've reached our destination before you say that," replied Cholkwa.

They reached the inlet in late afternoon. The ship's cook, a burly man with gray-brown fur, descended on them and seized their birds. Perig followed with his *tsin* ears.

Dinner was roast bird. The cook would use the ears tomorrow, Perig said. "The men are hungry. A stew takes time; and *tsin* ears require special preparation. I have to say the birds taste fine roasted. I'm almost certain they're related to *halpa*."

"How did they get here?" asked Cholkwa. "They could hardly fly."

"Maybe they've been here all along," Perig said. "Placed by the Goddess when she made the world."

"Or maybe people left them," said Ahl, licking her fingers.



"That's possible," Perig admitted.

Most of the sailors stayed on shore that night, as did Perig and Cholkwa. Ahl suspected the two men were interested in sex, now that they were safe and could get away from their female companions. Nothing could be done in the cabin. No self-respecting male would do anything so intimate in a room containing women. But on a dark beach, surrounded by other men — She envied them and went back to the ship.

The next day the Taig captain said, "I'm tired of your comrade's laziness. What is his excuse today? Sickness? An unlucky omen?"

"He still hasn't recovered from the storm," said Ahl.

"Nonsense," said the captain. "He will go on shore. You said he's a good hunter. We need food, and he clearly needs exercise and fresh air."

Argument was impossible. Leweli went with Ahl and the actors, though she looked unhappy and began complaining as soon as they were in the forest.

"Merhit is a good witch," said Ahl. "I'm confident her magic will keep the child safe. We have no choice, cousin. A captain must be obeyed."

**T**HIS TIME the birds were harder to find, but at noon they came on a flock, all grouped together in an open space on the moor, scratching with large blue feet and pecking. It was easy to kill as many as they were able to carry. Laden with their prey, they returned to the beach.

The pitch pot was turned over, and a black pool of pitch lay next to it. Bodies, the Taig sailors almost certainly, lay scattered on the sand.

"Bad luck!" said Perig.

Could they flee? Ahl glanced around. The forest was close, but not close enough. Ragged strangers moved toward them, holding bloody swords.

Perig stretched his arms out to the side. His hands were open and empty. "Obviously we can't fight you. But I ought to mention if you kill us, you will be killing a pair of women."

"What do you mean?" asked one of the men. His accent was thick, but Ahl could understand him.

Perig gestured. "Those two are women."

The man frowned. "They don't look it."

"Ahl, pull off your tunic," Perig said.

She did as he asked, dropping the tunic and unfastening the band that held her upper breasts. The moment she was bare, the men looked down. This was encouraging. In spite of being pirates, they had not lost all sense of right behavior.

"Put on your tunic," said one of the men in a stifled voice.

She picked up the tunic and pulled it on.

"There is a baby on the ship," Perig continued in his usual pleasant voice. "The other woman, the one holding the stick with birds, is the mother. I assume you're planning to kill us or maroon us. But you can hardly kill women or maroon them with unrelated men."

"How do you know what we can do?" asked the man who had spoken previously. Most likely he was the leader.

The men around him looked uneasy. One said, "Jehan," in a nervous tone.

"And why are these women traveling in disguise with men who aren't relatives?" added the man named Jehan. "I know foreigners lack self-respect, but this seems worse than usual."

"Why don't you disarm us, which is the obvious next step, and then we can talk," said Perig. "If you've left the Taig cook alive, you might give the birds to him."

Jehan swung his sword. Perig fell.

"Goddess!" cried Cholkwa, falling to his knees beside his lover. Ahl was certain now. She heard love in the young man's anguished voice.

Perig sat up, feeling his head.

"I used the flat," said Jehan. "But if he keeps talking, I'll use the edge."

"He'll be quiet," said Cholkwa and stood, helping Perig up. His hands, on the older man, seemed as careful as if he were holding a fragile treasure: something made of glass and gold.

"Now," said Jehan. "Give us your weapons."

They went down the beach, still carrying their birds, surrounded by pirates. Now Ahl could see beyond the Taig ship. There was another ship, somewhat smaller, outside the harbor entrance, blocking escape. Obviously it belonged to the pirates. Squinting against the glare of sunset, she tried to make out details, but couldn't tell if there were pirates on the Taig ship.

Clearly they held the beach and the remaining sailors on shore: a group of seven, two injured, one badly. The Taig cook was wrapping an already-bloody bandage around his chest. Guards stood around the prisoners, holding weapons that had belonged — Ahl was almost certain — to the Taig.

"Are the rest dead?" asked Ahl.

"Some," said the cook in an angry voice. "Most were on the ship, repairing the rigging. They are still there, guarding it against capture."

One of the guards said, "My cousin Jehan thought it would be a good idea to attack from the land. That's where you seemed to be, if your smoke was any indication. If we came sailing in from the west, you'd see us and make preparations. Better to circle to the south — the island would hide us — and land a party in the little southern harbor, then come through the forest and take you by surprise."

"It worked," said Jehan stubbornly.

"We don't have their ship," said the guard.

"We'll get it," Jehan said. "In the meantime, we have dinner."

"And two women," said one of the other pirates.

"What?" asked the guard. He was a stocky man with dark fur going silver over his shoulders. In Ahl's opinion, he looked sensible, not a trait she associated with piracy.

"I'm a woman," said Ahl. "And so is she."

"This is turning into a perplexing mess," the guard said. "What are two women doing on a Taig ship, disguised as men? Taig women don't travel, and why would any woman disguise herself as a man? Surely you know how dangerous it is! We could have killed you by mistake."

"Can I speak?" asked Perig.

"If you want to," said the guard. "And have something useful to say."

"He's one for chattering," said Jehan in a warning tone.

"Let him chatter," said the guard. "I want information."

"These two women needed to get south in a hurry and went in disguise, because they couldn't find a women's ship."

"Are you related to them? You don't look similar."

Perig hesitated briefly, then tilted his head in assent. "The women in our lineage are tall and have an authority we men lack."

"Which lineage?" the guard asked.

"Tesati," said Perig.

"Not one I know."

"It's to the north," said Perig. "At the edge of the Great Central Plain. Or rather it was there. The Unraveling has destroyed much. Another family overwhelmed ours. The men are dead, except for us."

"Why are you alive?" asked Jehan.

"We weren't home when the end came. Cholkwa and I are actors and often travel."

"Actors!" said the guard, looking interested.

"When we did come home, we found — " Perig smiled briefly. "No home. Our male kin were dead. The family that killed them, the Chaitin, had gathered in our female relatives and the children. We should have killed ourselves. It would have been the decent thing to do. But we found these two hiding out, along with Leweli's baby. They didn't want to be Chaitin. There are women who hold this kind of grudge."

Everyone was listening intently, of course. It was a good story, told excellently. But now Ahl saw a look of confusion on the Taig cook's face, followed by a look of horror. The cook was remembering the night before, she thought. Perig and Cholkwa had made love on the beach. The Taig sailors had noticed and been undisturbed. Traveling companions often give each other this kind of comfort, provided they are the same sex and not related. But if the two actors belonged to the same family, the act was incest. The cook opened his mouth, then closed it and glanced down, going back to work on his injured comrade.

A near thing! And not over. The cook might still decide to denounce the actors.

"Maybe we should have given our kinswomen to the Chaitin," Perig said. "They would have been safer; and there is always something offensive about the idea of women without a family. Such things happen to men. We know it! But women should live inside a double wall of matriarchs and soldiers."

"These ethical problems are never easy to untangle. In the end we decided to rely on the old rule, which says that men should not make decisions for women. That power lies in the hands of their mothers and their female relatives; and they were not available, nor were they kin, since they had become Chaitin, while these two remained Tesati. They

asked us to escort them south; and we agreed out of loyalty, which is not the foremost male virtue. That, of course, is directness or honesty. But loyalty is one of the five."

"I told you he talked a lot," said Jehan.

"Are you really actors?" asked the guard.

"Why would I lie?" asked Perig.

"I've never seen a play," the guard said. Ahl heard longing in his voice.

"Well, then," Perig said. "Let the Taig cook fix our birds. You can feast tonight and see *The Death of Eh Manhata*."

"He's dead?" cried the guard. The other pirates made noises indicating surprise.

"What happened?" asked Jehan.

"He was betrayed by men he trusted, captured and —" Perig stopped.

"The play will show you. Wait till tonight."

"It's all very well for you to talk about waiting," Leweli said. "But I have a child on board the Taig ship. I need to get back to her."

"We can't let you go," said Jehan.

"Why not?" asked the silver-backed guard.

"For one thing, the Taig might be willing to surrender their ship in order to get these two women back, especially if they have a baby on their hands."

"You are willing to hold women hostage?" asked Perig in a shocked tone.

Jehan frowned and raised his sword.

"Don't kill him," said the guard. "I want to see the play."

"For another," continued Jehan, "we can't let the women tell the Taig whatever they may have found out about us. What if they've realized how few of us there are? And how difficult it will be for us to take the ship?"

A look of pain crossed the guard's face. "Very well," he said. "Keep the women here."

The pirates untied the cook's feet, so he could work, helped by pirates. Soon a new fire was burning, and the cook was eviscerating birds. As for Ahl and her comrades, they settled in the sand close to the Taig prisoners. The guard settled with them, obviously anxious to talk. His name was Jehan, he said, the same as his cousin. Though he was Jehan Silverback, and his cousin was Long Jehan.

"Long?" said Perig. "He's no taller than you are."

"That isn't the way he's long," said Jehan Silverback, then looked embarrassed. "It's hard for me to remember these two are women."

"This isn't a situation where it's easy to remember anything having to do with manners," said Perig. "Though I'm glad to know you're a self-respecting man. How did you end in this line of work?"

He came from an island, said Jehan Silverback. "Where exactly I won't tell you, in case we decide to let you live." It was one of two islands that lay remote from all other land. The guard's family lived on one island. Another lineage — "our breeding partners" — lived on the other. Both islands were steep and stony, surrounded by rocks and shoals. Not much to look at, according to the guard, though his voice sounded affectionate to Ahl. "But the cliffs are full of nesting birds; and the waters next to shore are so full of shellfish that they are like stones on a beach; and there are plenty of fish."

The problem was the islands were treeless. The islanders lived in houses made of stone and sod. Their fuel was driftwood and the oil of marine animals.

Lacking timber, they could not build boats. Without boats, they would not be able to fish or reach their neighbors. "We might not starve, since we could still net birds and gather shellfish. But how could we breed without boats to carry men from one family to the other? We'd die out, unless we were reduced to inbreeding." There was horror in the guard's voice as he said this. "We are pirates because we can't buy the ships we need. Nothing we have to sell is of sufficient value."

"Couldn't you cut timber on an island like this one?" asked Ahl.

"We gather wood for ordinary uses on this island," the guard said. "And we could make some kind of wretched little dinghy from the timber here. But a good ship requires large trees, metal tools and fittings, fabric for the sails, rope and — most of all — skill."

"You want the Taig ship," said Perig.

"Yes. We thought we were in luck when we saw your smoke. Since the island is uninhabited, we knew that meant a ship, most likely one that had put in for water and repairs. The sailors would be tired from fighting the storm which blew them here; they would be preoccupied by work; and they would not expect any trouble. Why should they, in a place this

remote? Things didn't turn out exactly as we expected. But we have prisoners, eleven of you now. If we can't take the ship by force, maybe we can strike a bargain."

"It really doesn't seem wrong to you, holding women and a baby hostage?" asked Perig.

Jehan Silverback scratched his forehead. "It's a difficult situation and not one we expected. No one lives in this part of the ocean except us and our neighbors. When ships come here, it's usually to fish or hunt. The crews are male. What family would risk its women on work that is hard and dangerous and unpleasant, and which does not require any of the usual female skills? One does not negotiate with a storm or a fish."

There were, of course, many families whose women fished. But Ahl was not going to argue with this pirate, who seemed to have strong opinions about women's work. Nor did she wish to bring up the worst danger of this region, the one that would almost certainly keep women away: murderous pirates.

"You have never encountered a women's ship?" asked Perig.

"To the west of here we have," the guard said. "Not often, since we rarely go far into the narrow ocean. When we realize that a ship is crewed by women, we let it go with an exchange of greetings. We are not monsters! My cousin is right. You talk too much."

Perig said, "Let me go and help the cook. Then you'll be free of my foolish questions."

Jehan Silverback gave permission. The rest of them stayed where they were. By this time the sun was down and the sky darkening. Lamps began to glimmer on the two ships. This was a frightening situation, though not as frightening to Ahl as it would be to a modern woman. Having met the humans, we know that it is possible for a species to flourish in spite of behavior that our ancestors would find unthinkable; and we wonder if our own behavior is fixed. Could our men turn into monsters like human men? Could they turn on women and children? Is it possible that violence has no natural limits?

None of these questions occurred to Ahl, sitting on the darkening beach in another age. Instead she worried about the baby on the Taig ship. Surely it would wake soon, be hungry and cry. She worried about the possibility that her shipmates and the two actors would die, if not tonight,

then tomorrow, and she worried about the rest of this unlucky trip. Would they ever get to Helwar? Would she ever see Ki again? But she did not fear harm to herself or Leweli. Was she right to be fearless? At this distance in time we cannot say.

As dark closed around them, the cooking fire burned more brightly. Working in a red glare, the Taig cook roasted birds, while Perig prepared his *tsin* ears. Dismembered, the birds went into an iron pot with water, the ears and herbs.

"This is something," said Jehan Silverback. "A proper feast and then a play. We never have events like this on our island."

Soon there was food, *halin*, and fresh clean water, drawn from one of the island's springs. None drank water, except the prisoners.

"Eat moderately," Perig whispered as he settled next to Ahl.

"Why?" she hissed.

"The ears have to be prepared in just the right way. If not, they are toxic. Not fatal, but I hope —"

A pirate glanced at them. Perig stopped talking.

He had poisoned the stew. She whispered a warning to Leweli.

"This is likely to be a long night," her cousin whispered in answer.

While the pirates ate, Perig and Cholkwa consulted. Their costumes and props were on the Taig ship, so they borrowed from the pirates and prisoners: a long red ragged cloak, a stained yellow tunic, a staff with impromptu ribbons. They set torches on long poles in the sand and drew lines to mark a stage.

Then — the pirates full of food, but still drinking — they began.

This was *The Death of Eh Manhata*, Cholkwa announced. A true story, acted by men whose native home was on the Great Central Plain. "We have not lied. This story is the way things actually happened."

The first scene was between Perig in the red cape and Cholkwa. Perig was Manhata: arrogant and confident, the greatest man in the world. Cholkwa was a younger relative, worried about his kinsman. He was too trusting, Cholkwa said. The men who sought a meeting with him were liars. They would betray him.

Strutting back and forth, the red cape swirling, Perig said, "Nonsense."

It really was remarkable. Perig, who had always been mild and



reasonable, in no way formidable, now held everyone's attention. It seemed to Ahl that he had grown in size. His stride was forceful. His voice commanded. Even the cloak had changed, becoming — how could Ahl describe it? — richer and heavier, fit for a great leader, a warrior without equal.

In vain Cholkwa argued. Perig would not listen. Off he went to the foredoomed meeting.

Cholkwa left the circle of torchlight, returning shortly in the stained yellow tunic. Now he was one of the false allies, a wheedling plausible man, who had been — one sensed — handsome in his youth and was still in the habit of behaving seductively.

How did Cholkwa manage this? His own good looks were mostly gone; and he seemed older. The stained tunic helped, making him look seedy, but it was something more. The way he held himself? His voice? He didn't command attention like Perig; and Ahl could still see him inside the character he played, the way one saw people inside festival dolls, when firelight shone through the stick and cloth bodies. Nonetheless, he impressed her.

Ahl leaned forward, intent. Around her the pirates and prisoners were silent.

At first Manhata was oblivious. The other man, the ally, praised, made promises, even flirted, though carefully. Manhata ignored the flirtation and accepted the praise, expecting nothing less. Gradually Cholkwa's manner changed. Sharpness crept in. He began to mock the old warrior at the same time that he became more openly seductive.

A disturbing scene. Around her the pirates shifted and muttered. One stood up, stumbled into the bushes and threw up.

Understandable, though maybe it was the stew.

It took a long time for Manhata to understand what he was hearing. Finally he turned on the ally, shouting, "How dare you?"

The ally explained. The trap had closed. Manhata's men, the guard he'd brought with him, were dead by now. Manhata would join them soon. "You have lived too long and become a fool, deserving of a shameful death. I promise you, old man, that is the kind of death you'll get."

What happened next was impossible to understand. Perig barely moved, yet she could see every idea and feeling in his mind. Disbelief

came first, then anger — a brief hot flash, then fear. How was this possible? Manhata was fearless. As she watched, Perig grew smaller, collapsing in on himself like a festival doll at festival end, when the sticks that hold it up are folded. Now she saw Manhata's age. He was more than eighty at the time of his death. His life had been one of constant violence. Who knew how many injuries he had endured? Surely his body must have reached its limit. And he was alone. His sisters, who had guided him through his long career, were dead. What was left for him, except his terrifying reputation?

Courage was left. She could see that now, as the old man straightened, meeting the gaze of his former ally.

"Do what you will," Manhata said. The pirates sighed. As they did, Perig stepped out of the torchlight. Cholkwa joined him. A moment later the young man returned wearing his own tunic. Now he was a messenger, bringing news of Eh Manhata's death. He stood quietly, looking out at the audience, and described what happened next. It had been a bad death, long and deliberately painful; and Manhata handled it less than well. The Man Who Broke Lineages was himself finally broken. Ahl had heard most of this before. It was no more pleasant a second time. Of all the brutal things done during the Unraveling, this was the worst. Around her the pirates gasped and groaned. "Why?" cried more than one.

"His former allies wanted us to remember him this way," said Cholkwa. "If he had died in battle or by some ordinary form of execution, his reputation would not have been diminished. But this — "

"You should have lied," said Jehan Silverback. "You should have given him the death he had earned. How can you cooperate in something so contemptible?"

Perig stepped back into the torchlight. The red cloak was gone. He was Manhata no longer. "Anyone can be broken," he said in his ordinary, quiet, even tone. "No one escapes shame except through luck. This is something that Manhata may have forgotten, for a while at least. But he learned it at the end.

"That's one thing to remember. The other is, his enemies are fools."

"Why do you say that?" asked Jehan Silverback.

"In old age, when he no longer had his sisters to advise him, Manhata acted in ways that must be called foolish. This can't be denied. It's true as well that his courage failed him at the end.

"But think of the rest of his life! I'm from the plain, as my cousin told you. For more than fifty years, Manhata rose above the rest of us like a thundercloud that would not dissipate. Every time we looked up, there he was — his head in sunlight and lightning around his shoulders. Can a year or two of folly, a day or two of pain unmake a life like his?"

"Yes," said Long Jehan.

"No," said Jehan Silverback.

"Time will determine," Perig said in his usual reasonable tone.

That ended the play. The pirates continued drinking. By now they were obviously intoxicated. Several more threw up, lurching past the prisoners into the forest shadows. Long Jehan grabbed Cholkwa's arm, pulling him down on the sand beside him. Perig settled by the other pirate cousin. Ahl couldn't tell if Jehan Silverback had ordered him to do so or asked him. Maybe Perig was acting on his own, trying — like Manhata — to beg a better ending.

"I think it's time for us to leave," said Leweli quietly.

"Mother told me men were disgusting after they'd been drinking for a while," Ahl said in agreement.

Maybe they could say they needed to urinate, Ahl thought. That would get them to the forest. But no ruse was necessary. The pirate closest to them slumped over suddenly, his cup spilling from his hand. The next fellow over had already risen and was stumbling toward the Taig prisoners. Why, Ahl didn't know or want to know. She and Leweli rose together, stepping backward into the black forest shadow. No one called out.

Instead of entering the forest, they went along its edge, keeping in the shadow. Hah! It was dark! But there were stars above them and lamps on the two anchored ships. When the beach ended, they clambered over rocks, going out on the promontory which formed one side of the harbor. Someone by the pirate's fire was screaming. Ahl didn't think it was from pain or fear.

Finally, when they were a good distance from the beach, Leweli said, "This will do."

The two women dove into the water and swam toward the Taig ship.

Remember that Sorg is marsh. No one grows up there without learning to swim. Ahl was excellent and Leweli even better. Side by side, they stroked through the cold still water, making no sound. On shore the

pirates were shouting at one another. Had they discovered the missing women? Or were they quarreling, as drunks will do?

When they reached the ship, Ahl grabbed the anchor chain. It made a noise. A moment later she saw a shape above her, leaning over the ship's side. Metal gleamed in starlight.

"It's Ahlin," she said quietly. "With Lewekh. We escaped."

Ropes came down. They climbed up.

"I hope you'll be able to do something about that baby," said the Taig captain.

"You found it," said Ahl.

"Hard to miss it, once it began to cry."

"I'll take care of Dapple," said Leweli and went toward their cabin.

Ahl stayed with the captain, telling him about the situation on shore.

"The actor tried to poison them," he said, leaning on the railing and looking at the figures that moved around the pirate's fire. "They don't look dead to me."

"He said it wasn't fatal. They are certainly intoxicated, though that might be due to *halin*."

"They don't seem to be looking for you, which suggests an unusual degree of intoxication. Either they haven't noticed that you're gone, or they no longer care." The Taig captain paused, evidently thinking. "I could wait and hope they lose consciousness. But I think it'd be better to move before the other pirates — the ones on board the pirate ship — notice something is wrong. Do you want to join the attack, or are you a woman like your friend?"

"I'm a woman," said Ahl.

"How about the other two?"

"Perig and Cholkwa? They're men. When I left, it seemed to me they were trying to seduce the two chief pirates."

"With luck, that will prove distracting. I'll leave some men here, in case the pirates on the ship decide to move." The captain made a noise that indicated irritation. "This would be much easier, if I didn't have to worry about enemies on two sides. Not to mention a ship with damaged rigging. As the proverb says, when luck turns bad, it turns bad."

"True enough," said Ahl. She went down to the cabin and found a knife. Leweli was nursing the baby, who was quiet now.

"The Taig men are going to attack," Ahl said.

"In which direction?" Leweli asked.

"Shore."

Leweli tilted her head, regarding the child. "A hard decision. I'm glad it's not one I have to make. But the party looked as if it might become ugly. Maybe it should be broken up."

Ahl went back on deck, carrying the knife. The Taig sailors were clustered on the landward side of their ship. After a moment Ahl realized they were lowering a boat. "Quietly," said the captain to them. "Act with care."

There was a soft splash as the boat hit water. The sailors climbed down and rowed away, their oars making almost no sound.

The remaining sailors posted themselves along the rail, some watching the shore, while others kept an eye on the pirate vessel. A man said, "They'd be crazy to bring the ship in at night with the tide low, but they could send a boat. The captain says you're a woman. Why are you traveling in disguise?"

Ahl said, "I can't tell the story now. Later, if we survive."

After that they waited. The fire on the beach was burning low, and only a few figures remained around it. Most had wandered into darkness, though she could still hear them howling like *sulin*.

Finally, when she began to wonder if the Taig boat had sunk, a shout came over the water: sharp and commanding. Not a drunken howl. A battle call.

Men ran into the firelight, carrying weapons. The sailors around Ahl exhaled. "Hah! Taig!"

Behind her Leweli said, "The baby's asleep at last. What's going on?"

"The battle has begun," said Ahl.

They were too far away to see anything clearly. Ahl longed for a looking-into-the-distance tube. Such things existed at this point in history, and she had seen them in the south. But the Taig ship didn't have one. The battle was small dark figures, meeting in dim light. There was more shouting, then a high shrill scream that did not end.

One of the Taig sailors said, "Don't you think you ought to go below deck? It can't be good for a mother to see this kind of violence. Or any woman, for that matter."

"Is that what's worrying you?" asked Ahl.

"Of course not," said another man. "We're worried about our kinsmen on shore. But there's nothing we can do about their situation. So my cousin here is taking the only action he is able to take. I have to say he's right. It's the reason our women don't travel. No mother — or future mother — should watch while men kill each other. It's bound to do something to the milk."

"If not to the milk, to the mind," said a third man. "What kind of mothers are you two going to be after a trip like this one?"

Enough, thought Ahl. She and Leweli went down to the cabin. The porthole was open. She found she could see the beach. The fire had been scattered and was mostly out. She thought she could see motion, and there was still noise. Apparently the battle continued.

"How could I be a worse mother by traveling than by staying home?" asked Leweli. "If I had stayed in Sorg, Dapple would have died."

"Nothing men say about child-rearing is worth attention," Ahl said. "I wish I could see more clearly."

Finally — it must have been an *ikun* later — she heard noises on deck. The Taig sailors returning? Or a pirate boarding party? Leweli lay asleep. Ahl stood and pulled her knife.

The noises continued, none of them loud. Surely this meant it was the Taig sailors. Ahl relaxed, then grew tense again as the cabin door opened. She'd forgotten to bar it. Too late!

The actors entered, both unsteady. Perig's tunic was torn, and Cholkwa had a bandage wrapped around one arm.

"That," said Perig as he settled on the floor, "was the worst evening of my life."

"You, at least, didn't have Long Jehan in your hands," said Cholkwa. "Goddess!" He leaned against the open doorway. "Don't get comfortable. We're sleeping on deck."

"Are you all right?" Perig asked the women.

"Yes," said Leweli. "It was a fine performance."

"Which part?" asked Cholkwa. "The lies Perig told about our history or the play itself or the way the two of us behaved with Jehan and Jehan?"

"We didn't see the last," said Ahl.

"Good," said Perig.

"The play," said Leweli.

"Wasted on louts," said Cholkwa. "Get up, old man."

Perig groaned, stood and searched in his baggage until he found a tunic, faded but clean and untrorn.

"That will do," said Cholkwa. "You needn't look pretty. There's no one left to charm."

"It's over?" asked Ahl.

"There's still the pirate ship," said Cholkwa. "But the pirates on shore are prisoners or dead. Perig needs sleep. So do I."

Then they were gone. She'd heard about the kind of mania that overcomes some men after battle. That must be what she'd just seen, unless it was the effect of *halin* and the *tsin* ears. Cholkwa, who had always seemed a bit sullen, had shone with happiness, so beautiful — in spite of his rumpled fur — that even a woman could see his beauty. Perig had seemed tired, nothing more. Maybe it was too soon for him to feel happiness. Maybe he'd done too much.

That night she dozed rather than slept. Often she was awake, or in a strange state between sleep and waking. At dawn she went on deck. The Taig sailors were up, watching the pirate ship.

"Leaving, I think," said the Taig captain.

Sails billowed out, filling with wind. The anchor went up, water dripping from it and flashing in the first rays of the rising sun.

"They've decided to abandon their kin," said one of the Taig sailors.

"What do you expect of pirates?" said another sailor.

The ship headed north and west, vanishing at last among the waves. When it was gone, the Taig captain said, "We need to spend another day here. I want the two of you — the women — to stay on board."

"Why?" asked Ahl.

"What we have to do on shore is not pleasant."

Cremate their dead, Ahl thought, and kill the remaining pirates. Cremation did not bother her, though it took a primitive form in her era; but the cremation of Taig men belonged to Taig men. The other activity was male as well.

"We'll stay on board," said Ahl.

Perig and Cholkwa went with the Taig men. Ahl and Leweli went to the cabin. The day had a mild wind, enough to carry the pirate ship away,

but not enough to bring fresh air through the porthole. The room seemed stifling to Ahl. The baby fretted. "She misses her potion," Leweli said. "But I'm not giving her any more, unless she becomes impossible."

The baby became impossible and got more potion. "Just a little, to make her quiet."

Ahl went through her baggage and repacked everything, made sure her knives were sharp, then went on deck.

"Something has occurred to me," she said to a sailor. "If you build a fire for cremation, it may attract more pirates."

"We thought of that," the sailor said. "We won't cremate our men until we're ready to leave. What the captain is doing now is questioning the pirates. When he's done, they'll be killed and buried. No reason to burn them. We don't intend to take their ashes home."

"I haven't heard anything," Ahl said.

"Our men went inland with the pirates. The captain didn't want to bother you. Sound carries well over water, especially on a day like this."

There were dark shapes on the beach, laid in a line. The Taig dead, almost certainly. One man stood by them, leaning on a spear. No one else was visible. A bright hot day. The air barely moved. Bugs would be gathering around the Taig bodies. Not a pleasant job the watcher had.

Would it be pleasanter to be inland, torturing the captive pirates?

Ahl shook her head, thinking life was full of difficult choices.

**I**N LATE AFTERNOON the sailors came back, Perig and Cholkwa with them. Ahl waited on the deck. Cholkwa looked sullen again, while Perig looked grim.

"That's done," the older man said. "The Taig know how to reach the pirates' homes, though the pirates certainly did not want to give out the information."

"Goddess," said Cholkwa.

"They said they weren't going to harm you," Perig told Ahl. "They let you go, they said, though my impression at the time was they hadn't noticed your disappearance. Jehan and Jehan certainly seemed busy with other things. I don't remember anyone coming to tell them that you were gone, though I was occupied at the time."

"You shouldn't talk about such things to women," said Cholkwa.



"You did last night."

"I was drunk."

The sailors set to work on their repairs. Most looked grim, though a few seemed satisfied. The next day the ship was ready to go. They took it out of the harbor, anchoring where the pirate ship had been, then rowed back to burn their kinsmen.

This was done at night. Looking through the porthole, Ahl saw the great red glare of the funeral fire. The air smelled of wood smoke and burning flesh. By morning the fire was out. No smoke rose into the cloudless sky. The Taig let out their sails, going west and south over an ocean dotted with foam.

Once the island was gone from sight, the Taig captain called them all on deck. "I want to know the truth about you people. I've heard one story about you which is obviously untrue; and our cook says there's another story, which you told the pirates. Is there a third story? A fourth? A fifth?"

Perig glanced at Ahl. "Tell him what you know," she said.

Perig did, describing how he and Cholkwa had been stranded in the country of the Sorg. "Like a *luat* trapped in a too-shallow lagoon." Just when they reached desperation, the witch appeared and made her offer: money to go south, if they would escort two women in disguise. "It was wrong to do it, of course," Perig said. "But we had no alternative."

The Taig captain glanced at Ahl. "Why did you need to flee your home, escorted by unrelated men? Surely this is shameful behavior."

Ahl told her story: how the Sorg matrons had decided to kill five children in order to get out of a business contract. One child was left alive, the baby in the cabin. She and Leweli had decided to save it, advised by the witch who hired Perig and Cholkwa. "She said it was the right thing to do."

"You've put us in a bad place," the captain said. "It's too late in the season to turn back and risk more storms. In addition, if I returned you to Sorg, the Helwar would be angry; and no one makes better ships than they. But if I take you to Helwar, as I intend to do, I'll make bad enemies among your kin. Why couldn't you let the child die? The crime — if it is a crime — would not be yours, but would belong to your mother and the other matriarchs. It's wrong to take on too much responsibility."

"That may be," said Ahl. "But it's done."

The cook, who had been listening, said, "It's my belief that those of us who were taken prisoner would have died, except for the actors' cleverness. Now that I know they are not perverts and committers of incest, I can be grateful. Granted, it's odd for men to travel with unrelated women, but every man is supposed to help women in need of help; and healthy babies should not be killed, especially to escape from a business contract. Where will we be, if people don't keep the agreements they make? I don't intend to tie my mind into knots by trying to make sense of this situation. Go with the simple solution, kinsman! Thank these folk for their help, and deliver them to Helwar."

"A good cook is always worth listening to," the captain said. "I will take your advice."

The ship continued west and south, carried by a mild and steady wind. Leweli spent most of her time in the cabin, caring for the baby, who was often awake, now that she no longer got the potion. Without the witch's magic, the child proved as irritable as any ordinary baby.

"And maybe more so," said Ahl to Perig, while explaining why she spent most of her time on deck. "I'm willing to save the child from death and maybe ruin my own life by doing so, but I will not listen to her cry."

Several days later, Ahl asked, "Did the *tsin* ears work the way you expected?"

"Not entirely," Perig said. "If you peel them before cooking and cut off the base, they are an ordinary food, except for being unusually tasty. But if this isn't done, they cause visions, followed by stupor. In my home country diviners use them to look into the future. They wear headdresses in the shape of *tsin* ears." Perig glanced sideways and smiled. "Foreigners think the headdresses are funny; and maybe they are; but the visions are often useful, though only if the person involved has been trained."

"Wasn't it dangerous to give something like that to pirates?"

"The situation was dangerous already. The pirates were going to kill all of us, except possibly you and Leweli. It seemed like a good idea to try everything: the *tsin* ears, drama, sex — if the pirates wanted sex, as they obviously did. Anything to distract them and delay the moment of killing. I thought if they began to see visions or fell into a stupor, maybe we could escape. Or maybe the Taig sailors would attack, or the Goddess reach down her hand and lift us all to safety. Who can say?" For a moment he

was silent, looking out at the ocean. "If I'd had the witch's potion, I would have used it. But it was on the ship. I used what was at hand."

Ten days later a sailor vanished. The ship was searched. He wasn't found.

Perig told Ahl about it. "They think he went overboard last night. He was one of the men held prisoner by the pirates, a young man, good looking."

Odd, thought Ahl. She didn't remember a good looking man among the prisoners.

"After they were drunk, several of the pirates approached him. He wanted nothing to do with them. It's not a good idea to say 'no' to a drunken pirate. For one thing, they won't listen."

"He killed himself out of shame," Ahl said.

"The Taig believe so, though it doesn't seem to me especially shameful to endure what can't be prevented. Maybe he thought he could have behaved in a more disciplined and undemonstrative fashion. Or maybe he wanted the memories of what had happened to stop. He should have waited. Most memories grow less sharp in time."

It seemed wrong for a man to die on his way home, in good weather, after danger was past. Was what he had experienced so terrible? Hadn't the two actors gone through something similar and made jokes about it? She asked Perig about this, speaking carefully, since most men don't enjoy discussing sex or violence with women.

Obviously Perig was under no obligation to answer her, no matter how indirectly she asked her question, it was rude. But he did reply, his tone courteous and more serious than usual.

"Remember how Cholkwa and I make our living. Actors spend most of their time traveling. Any business that is carried on away from home is risky.

"Remember also that no man can expect help in a foreign country. Especially, no man can expect help given freely. That is done for women and children, but a man is expected to pay in one way or another. Actors learn to do what is necessary; and we make jokes about these necessary actions. Why not?"

She thought she understood what he was saying, and it fit with everything she'd heard about traveling players. They lived at the edge of

morality. How could they feel shame in the same way as other men? After all, they sold strangers the right to stare at them and said the most intimate things, which ordinary men would reveal only to their closest relatives or friends, in loud voices in public.

"Was the Taig youth right to die?" she asked. "Is that what a man of ordinary honor would do?"

Perig glanced at her sideways. "One who isn't an actor? I think not, though it isn't my business to judge any of the Taig. He should have waited and spoken with his relatives. It's not a good idea to kill yourself without permission. Now his mother has lost a son and the men on this ship have lost a cousin. Did he have the right to deprive them of so much, because the world is not as safe and pleasant as he imagined?"

A troubling conversation. Ahl was no longer sure she could disentangle right from wrong. The threads seemed knotted together. When she pulled on a bright one, she found something dark, while the dark threads often led to something as bright as gold or silver.



HL PONDERED morality while the ship continued south. Looking around, she began to see evidence that land was near. Clouds like towers stood at the horizon, and there was an increase in the number of birds. Next came an island: a bald rock that rose straight out of the ocean, useless to anyone except the birds. Another island followed, equally bare and sheer. Finally they passed a fishing boat, wallowing home with as many fish as it could carry. The Taig sailors shouted and waved message banners. The fishers replied with their own shouts and flags.

"We'll be in harbor before dark," the Taig captain said.

Soon after that Helwar came into view. Its forested peaks rose into a wreath of clouds, and mist lay in the upland valleys like handfuls of unspun wool. Off the north coast rain fell like a curtain made of gauze. Ahl's mind filled with happiness.

One troubling idea remained. "I have a final question," she said to Perig, as they watched Helwar approach.

"Surely you can stop asking questions now."

"What broke apart your acting company?"

He was silent for a moment. "That's my business."

"It's obvious that you and Cholkwa have a secret," Ahl said. "I think I know what it is."

"Do you?" he asked.

"You have been lovers for a long time; everything about you suggests as much; and he's still young. It would surprise me if he's twenty-five."

"You think I'm a child molester," said Perig.

"Well," said Ahl. "I've met every other kind of criminal on this journey."

"It hasn't been a lucky trip," Perig admitted.

"How old was he when you met?"

Perig turned, leaning his elbows on the rail and looking around to see who might be near. "What are you going to do with this idea?"

"Nothing. You got us out of Sorg and saved us from the pirates. Except for you, they might have killed Leweli and me, or adopted us and taken us home to their miserable island. I will not repay you with harm."

"Hah," said Perig, the long slow exhalation which can mean anything. For a while he was silent. Ahl waited, her eyes on the cloud-capped island.

At last Perig said, "He was fourteen when he left home. His family had been destroyed in the war, and he refused to join the lineage that had killed all his male kin."

"Was that family the Chaitin?" asked Ahl. "Is he Tesati?"

"Yes. I didn't know his family name at first, nor did he know mine. Actors use their personal names, so as not to embarrass their families. He was a beggar I found on the road, fed and cleaned and found to be lovely.

"I said he could stay with the company if he was old enough, but I wouldn't have an unrelated child traveling with me. Of course he told me he was adult. He wasn't lying by much. He'd been on his own for almost a year by then.

"We were lovers before he reached his fifteenth birthday, and before he learned my family name. When he learned it, he tried to kill me, though it wasn't a serious effort. I took the knife away from him, and he explained."

"You are Chaitin," Ahl said, not certain what she felt. Confusion? Horror? A need to laugh? This is the kind of joke the Goddess loves to play:

two-sided like a sword, with sharp edges that can cut to the bone. When the joke is especially fine, when the Great One brings it down like a blade on her victim, piety requires that everyone — even the victim — laugh. But Ahl had never been religious.

"Yes," said Perig. "He's angry at me for telling his story to the pirates; but I had to think quickly; and it's always a good idea to stay close to the truth when lying. So I turned one fierce and stubborn boy into a pair of women, and I turned myself into a hero. Art is full of such transformations."

"The cook was right. You are a committer of incest."

"No," he said firmly. "Cholkwa was never adopted by my family. Therefore what we did was not incest. But it would have been, if I'd dragged him home and said, 'Here's a cousin I found at the side of the road.' The actors in my company knew what we'd been doing. The story would have come into daylight; and my hair goes up when I think of how my mother would have responded.

"In any case, Cholkwa didn't want to join the Chaitin, and I didn't want to give him up."

"He stayed with you, after finding out who you were?"

"I'm Chaitin Perig when I'm at home, which isn't often. The rest of the time I'm Perig the actor. The answer to your question is 'no.' He ran away. I followed and dragged him back, partly because I knew how dangerous the plain was for someone like him — alone, without a family. But mostly because love had made me crazy.

"The second time he came back on his own. What else could he do? Starve on the plain? Live among criminals and learn to be like them? I offered him safety and the chance to learn a skill more honest than robbing travelers."

"And this is what broke apart your company?"

"After so many years," Perig said in admission. "I really thought we could hide the secret forever. But we don't always get along. We had a quarrel which was overheard. When Cholkwa has been drinking, he drags the past forward. The actor who overheard us is Chaitin. As far as he was concerned, it was incest. In addition, I had robbed our family of a child who had grown up to a perfectly acceptable young man. Even worse, my cousin had been interested in Cholkwa, though nothing had happened.

Imagine how he felt! He had been on the edge of perversion without knowing it!

"Of course he made a lot of noise, and the other men decided the company was unlucky. That was true enough. I can't blame them for going.

"I don't think my cousin has a future as an actor. He's stiff as a plank and far too moral. It was a mistake to take him into the company. But when a relative asks a favor, it's difficult to refuse."

Ahl looked at her hands, almost seeing the tangle of darkness that filled them. Perig was wrong about his lover. A man could be kinless. So could a woman, though it wasn't common. But every child must have a family. Cholkwa could not be Tesati, since that lineage was gone, and no other lineage had adopted him. Therefore he was Chaitin or had been until his fifteenth birthday. When the two of them first had sex, it was incest and the molesting of a child, but only by a few days, twenty or thirty. How could wrong behavior be a matter of timing? She asked Perig this question.

"Everything is a matter of timing," Perig said. "When the witch came with her offer, I thought, 'What fine timing! What excellent luck!'" He gave Ahl a sideways glance. "If you keep quiet about our story, this may still be true. Cholkwa and I can still recover."

"I have already promised to cause you no harm," Ahl said. "I want this journey to end. Too many bad things have happened since I left Helwar. I've learned too many things I didn't want to know."

"You would ask questions," Perig said.

"I'll stop. All I want now is Ki and a safe place to stay."

Perig turned, looking at the cloudy island. "You have almost reached safety. With luck Helwar Ki will be waiting."

As the fishers had promised, they were in harbor by sundown. The two women hurried onshore, Dapple in Leweli's arms. By nightfall they were in a great house, surrounded by matriarchs, telling the story of Sorg's betrayal. Ki was there, leaning over the back of her mother's chair, looking both grim and happy. Even in the midst of her dark narration, Ahl felt happy as well.

When the story was done, a matriarch spoke. Large and solid, well into middle age, she still had her baby spots. Her son had fathered Dapple, though the women from Sorg didn't know this. "If Sorg wants to escape

our alliance so badly, let them go! It's no loss, since they have shown themselves to be cheats of the worst variety. What kind of people enter into a contract, intending to break it? What kind of people breed children, knowing the children have no future?

"We need to tell everyone in the narrow ocean about this behavior. No one should trust the Sorg, and no one will, once this story has traveled. As for the child, it's my advice that we adopt her and her mother."

Gray eyes met blue-gray eyes. One by one, the women of Helwar tilted their heads. A quick decision, you may say. Remember how angry the Helwar must have been, and remember that every child must have a family.

Leweli was invited to stay in the great house, along with Dapple, but Ahl went back to the *Foam Bird* with Ki. A fine rain was falling, dimming the lights of Helwar Town. The ships in harbor seemed ghost-like, though the *Bird's* deck was solid enough, once they set foot on it.

Ki's cabin was exactly as Ahl remembered. Hard to imagine anyone moving Ki's large bed. Made of carved wood, it was fastened to the wall and floor for safety in turbulent weather. The hanging lantern was too fine to change. Five *luatin* curled around a bronze bowl. Their eyes and teeth were gilded. One held a silver fish in its mouth. Another held a bronze harpoon no longer than Ahl's smallest finger. The weapon was broken; a torn rope — made of twisted gold wire — flew out from it. Who could say what had happened to the *luat* hunter?

In the lantern's bowl a seed oil burned, aromatic and bright.

"Nothing is missing, except your belongings," said Ki to Ahl. "You can bring them tomorrow."

They drank *halin*. Ahl spoke of her journey: the storm, the pirates, the actors' cleverness.

"And courage, I should think," said Ki. "It must have been frightening to act in front of criminals. As for deliberately seducing men like that — Surely every instinct and every idea of morality would push one back."

"Maybe," said Ahl in a tone that lacked conviction. According to Perig, his motivation had been fear of death, rather than courage; and she doubted that ideas about morality had much effect on either man.

"You owe them a lot," said Ki firmly. "As do I and all the Helwar." This was true. Ahl tilted her head in agreement.



They moved on to other topics, then into Ki's large bed. Tangled with her lover, smelling and tasting Ki, Ahl forgot — for a while — her uncertainty; though the person she had been, the always confident daughter of Sorg, was gone; and never, in a long life, did she regain her family's absolute, unquestioning self-assurance.

**T**HE REST OF THE STORY can be told quickly. Ahl refused adoption, since it would end her romance with Ki. Instead she remained Sorg until her kin disowned her. Then the Hasu, who were neighbors of the Helwar, adopted her as a courtesy. For the rest of her life, she was Hasu Ahl, though she visited her new family only rarely, preferring to stay with her lover and Leweli.

Perig and Cholkwa formed a new company and brought northern theater to the Great Southern Continent. Previous to this, the southerners had told stories through a combination of narration and dance. The new style was recognized everywhere as an improvement. To actually see heroes, as they struggled! To hear their voices! To have their anguish made so vivid that it could be felt! This was something!

The two men remained lovers, though their relationship was difficult. At times they quarreled so badly that one or the other left the company. During one such period, Perig came to Helwar. Cholkwa was on the continent, in a far southern area where the people were barely civilized, but great lovers of drama, especially the comedies for which (it turned out) Cholkwa had a gift.

"A surprise to me," said Perig to Ahl. "I never thought Cholkwa would do so well dressed up as an animal with an erect penis. As we age, we learn who we really are. But," he added, while turning a cup of *halin* between his hands, "the plays are really clever. Cholkwa can write comedy. Who can say, maybe it's more difficult than the kind of writing I do."

After he drank some more, he said, "The problem is the secret we share. One should never base love on something which must be hidden. It's like building a tower in a bog. Nothing is solid. Cracks run everywhere."

"You could live apart," said Ahl.

"And you could leave Helwar Ki."

In the end, the actors formed two companies, but remained acknowledged lovers. They organized their tours so they met often. Towns vied to be their meeting place. Even in later years, when there were many companies in the south, no one could equal Perig as a tragic hero or Cholkwa for humor.

As for Dapple, she was given the name of Helwar Ahl and used it while growing up. But after she was an adult, she became interested in acting and formed the first women's company anywhere. Even now women in theater, actors and playwrights, call her "mother" or "the originator."

Because acting was a dubious activity in those days, especially for women, she went back to her baby name. In this way, the Helwar were not embarrassed. Nor was her aunt Ki's lover.

Nothing remains of the plays written by Perig and Cholkwa, but we have fragments of Dapple's work. No one has ever written more beautifully in her native language; and much of the beauty remains in the various translations. There are many of these. As the witch predicted, Dapple became famous. Even now, after centuries, her words are like diamonds: pure, hard, angular, transparent, full of light.



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## CURIOSITIES

### *THE WELL OF THE UNICORN,* BY FLETCHER PRATT (1948)

**F**ANTASY literature of the late 1990s does not often articulate political issues — indeed, the absence of politics from the fantasy of manners genre (such as *A College of Magic* by Caroline Stevermer) seems to scream for a classically Marxist examination: “Who owns the means of production?” — but this was not always the case.

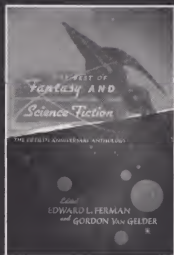
Fletcher Pratt’s 1948 novel, *The Well of the Unicorn*, deals with political turmoil in the land of Dalarna. Evicted from his family lands, Airar Alverson joins the band of the Iron Ring, a rebellion against the oppressive rule of the Vulkings. His leadership during a successful ambush helps build a popular following among a variety of ethnic and economic groups (mercenaries, free-fishers, pirates, city-folk, and forest dwellers). Airar’s rag-tag bunch acts with guerrilla flexibility against the totalitarian

Vulkings. Intrigues and battles are interwoven with political discussions and reflections on the consequences of using magic (also a theme in Pratt’s *The Blue Star*). *The Well of the Unicorn* is anything but dry: Pratt’s characters (and their sex lives) are very different from Tolkien’s rather idealized world.

*The Well of the Unicorn* was first published under the pseudonym of George U. Fletcher (one of my copies was inscribed by Pratt to his friend Doc Clark, “To John Disgusting Clark, George Urinaborg Fletcher”). The setting closely parallels medieval Denmark and, interestingly enough, much of Dalarna’s “real-world” history can be found in *The Third King* (1950), Pratt’s study of 14th-century King Valdemar IV Atterdag. *The Well of the Unicorn* has been reprinted several times and is well worth reading in any form. ♣

—Henry Wessells

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